



Falling Dreams of Fang Hua

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Synopsis :

I have a foster father...

Um, that's not the important part. I just want to say, why doesn't he understand the differences between boys and girls in this world? He insists a pornographic picture is actually a diagram of acupuncture points. And also...why did he raise me as a boy for 15 years?! It's impressive that he can write prescriptions, but I studied poisons.

But, why is he a Fang Hua Beast...

Info :

<http://www.novelupdates.com/series/falling-dreams-of-fang-hua/>

Raws :

<http://www.sto.cc/101698-1/>

Translator :

<http://volaretranslations.com/falling-dreams-fang-hua/>



Table of chapters :

Book One: Morning Dew on the Aristolochia, So Close Yet Worlds Apart

Chapter 1: A Single Rancid Mantou Chapter 2: An Encounter Returning Home

Chapter 3: Foster Father Fang Hua

Chapter 4: Two or Three Interesting Incidents at Home

Chapter 5: Drunk on Wine

Chapter 6: First Encounter with the Red Wood Chapter 7: Fang Hua
Beast

Chapter 8: Love Oath

Chapter 9: A Peeper Betrayed Chapter 10: An Amusing Bath Story
Chapter 11: Gift of a Hairpin Chapter 12: Young Han Zichuan

Chapter 13: The Mysterious Corpse

Chapter 14: A Mask of Human Skin?

Chapter 15: Meeting at the Jade Pool

Chapter 16: Confronting Yifu

- Chapter 17: The Mystery of My Father
- Chapter 18: Chance Encounter
- Chapter 19: Pill-Crazy
- Chapter 20: Lord Nongyu

Chapter 21: Pornography Book Crisis

Chapter 22: A Daughter’s First Menses Chapter 23: On Ancient Methods of Staunching Bloodflow Chapter 24: His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince Chapter 25: Liberties Taken, Liberties Given Chapter 26: Abandoned Child Chapter 27: Entering the Palace

Chapter 28: Meeting an Old Friend

Chapter 29: Legendary Face-Changing Expert (Part 1) || (Part 2)

Chapter 30: A Clingy Servant

Chapter 31: Strange Illness (Part 1) || (Part 2) Chapter 32: Two or Three Incidents of Adultery

Chapter 33: Variables

Chapter 34: (no title)

Chapter 35: Departure

Book Two: 8,000 Year-Old Jade, Who'll Share It With Me?

Chapter 36: Carefree Idler

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45 (Part 1) || (Part 2) Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48 (Part 1) || (Part 2)

Chapter 1: A Single Rancid Mantou

A temple.

A dilapidated temple.

A dilapidated temple without the scent of incense, nor the sign of worshippers.

The lighting in the temple was heavy and hazy, its interior completely wrecked. The body of the Buddha statue in the center was completely covered in dust and shattered, though it still looked dignified. A dilapidated temple like this couldn't shield from the wind or rain, but destitute people frequently used it as a place to hide.

There was no fire burning within the temple, so it was a bit chilly.

On the side, a few people dressed in rags who resembled beggars hugged rolls of dry grass, claiming the warmest, driest places for themselves. As for me, I used my sleeve to wipe my face and spat once.

I scanned each corner of the area while undoing my waistband, squatting in the forest in front of the temple. Pretending to go to the bathroom, I waited until no one was looking before digging in the dirt...

It was risky doing something during this time of day, so I had to be quick and precise. The old, long robe I was wearing didn't fit my body at

all. I knew this outfit made me look ridiculous. The ash-green clothes were even stolen off a dead body.

I didn't know my name.

An old beggar at the temple said I was delivered here by my mother on a windy, snowy day. She was a woman with a teardrop birthmark at the corner of her eye, a peerless youth whose beauty was unlike a mortal's. Whenever the old smelly beggar got to this point, he'd look at me with a turbid eye and shake his head hopelessly. And then I knew he'd say, you're not even equal to one-tenth of your mother's looks.

Pah!

This old beggar was already at death's door, but still so lecherous.

Though I say this, he was my only protector within the rundown temple. Even when hunger struck, he never forgot to leave a mouthful of soup for me.

"During the chaotic years of war, soldiers mutinied and troops rebelled. Families were torn apart and numerous starving corpses were displayed." These were the last words the old man left me before he died. I thought they were the most educated things he ever said, because I couldn't understand a thing.

But as a little beggar, I didn't need things like inner meanings and polished conduct. No matter how many words I learned, it wouldn't find me food. For me to live on this crappy piece of land for five years without

starving to death was nothing short of a miracle.

I once had a major illness whose fever muddled my head, so I had no idea how old I was. At first glance, I appeared to be seven or eight like a child, but I don't think I was only that old, because I understood a lot of things. Maybe I just didn't grow up enough.

Up until he died, the old beggar firmly believed I still had unsettled things. He said back then the temple wasn't so rundown and I wore very good clothes as if I was the child of a rich family. He told me I had a mother, and she'd definitely come back to pick me up.

But, none of what he said to me left a lasting impression... ..

This old beggar used to be a storyteller, so who knew if all the things he used to say were just wild tales. This was a place where a man-eat-man creed was forced to exist. As for me, the only thing to do was to figure out how to keep living.

In the present, reality had the only person who was good to me in the temple dead. My future prospects were bleak, but luckily the old beggar left me some food before he passed away.

My tedious, long sleeves were covered in dust from being dragged through the ground. Filthy dirt lined my fingernails. After digging through the moist earth, I unearthed an oil-paper package containing the remnants of half a mantou[1]. This year, there was very little food. There were even people willing to eat white clay[2], so stealing, hiding, looting were all common techniques for survival. Only by doing this could one keep living in these turbulent times.

Furtively, I used the span of a few seconds to open the oil-paper package and took a bite of the old mantou inside. I held that bite in my mouth, reluctant to swallow. My hand trembled as I rewrapped the food and inhaled its scent, then reverently, carefully, put it back in the hole. Immediately afterward, I flattened myself against the ground, spreading out my sleeves to gather more dirt to bury the mantou. I used the chance to stuff my mouth with white clay as well.

...chewing a bit, I couldn't help but knit my eyebrows. The taste wasn't too good, but at least it filled my stomach.

"You dirty rascal, what are you eating here? You didn't even pay respect to your elders."

Startled, I grasped at the dirt like a dog paddling in water, wanting to cover all traces of my recent excavation.

"Looks like that old beggar must have left him some good food." Suddenly, someone launched a surprise attack, and a foot kicked my back. My body burned from the pain as I crawled forwards, trying in vain to suppress my tears. It made me choke before I had time to swallow, and I spat out the pieces of mantou mixed with mud.

That white-colored clay mixed with the glutinous pieces of mantou.

What a waste.

"Get closer! He has mantou." A few pairs of dirty hands searched

everywhere until they fished out the paper package in the dirt.

"It's already a little rancid."

"It's still edible, leave me some."

"His granny[3]...stupid lowlife, you actually learned how to sneak off and eat by yourself, just watch me beat you to death, thief."

A rain of fists fell upon my body. Everything, even my organs, hurt. This kind of burning sensation was more severe than stomach pains after a few days with no food. Either way, it spelled death.

"All of you beggars bullying me—your mom, I'm going to beat you up!" I crawled atop a person and grabbed their leg, biting viciously past the stinky, dirty trousers.

"That hurts, you b***ch spawn!"

Dust rose and blinded me for a second, before the fists fell like a storm of jade plates. My small and broken body was beat forwards step by step, but my trembling hands stretched forwards to pick up the mantou that had fallen on the dirt. I wrenched myself free to stuff it in my mouth and start chewing furiously. The moist dirt had the flavor of raw fish and mantou, and was a little stifling.

My eyes were damp. This was called, 'Even if I die, I can't become a hungry ghost!'

I think the bullies were pretty angered by my heroics. Every one of them jabbed me as they grabbed my collar and shook.

Even while being shaken, do not spit out the bird![4]

The mantou was rancid, but it was still a mantou, a scarce commodity.

Just as I closed my eyes to prepare myself for another round of trampling, silence fell around the area. The strange atmosphere really made a person's heart uneasy.

My body bent a few times and I crawled forwards, hand fumbling for that rancid mantou so I could prepare to take another bite. But then a pair of boots, so white they couldn't have appeared in a rundown temple like this, showed up before my eyes to step on my last piece of food. This kind of white...was even more snow-white than my mantou.

I was flabbergasted.

A white, crescent-moon robe slowly lowered itself to the ground in folds, the cloth made from an unknown, high-quality material. I don't know what kind of thing its owner tossed out, but the urchins who were beating me up broke up into a hubbub and started looting amongst themselves.

I remained stubbornly on the ground, unmoving, still cradling that piece of rancid mantou.

"This is still edible?" a voice rang out like the tinkling of jade, yet it was filled with strength, the intonation gentle and refined like a clear spring of cold water pouring into my entire being. Even the pain wracking my body had lessened.

"If I don't eat, I'll starve to death."

"If you agree to come home with me, I'll give you three meals a day and promise you'll eat until you're full."

A jade-like hand, beautiful and slender, gently reached over to prop me up, as if afraid to hurt me. The motion made me look up at the person, surprised. Even after many years and events had passed, I would never be able to accurately describe that moment or the soul-stirring profundity of its beauty.

Early spring of that year was my fifth season at the dilapidated temple.

I met Fang Hua for the first time.

[1] mantou (馒头) —steamed bun made with flour. [2] white clay (观音土) —guanyin tu, literally translated as Bodhisattva Guanyin (Goddess of Mercy) earth, a type of white clay eaten by famine victims in China. [3] his granny (他奶奶的) —ta nainai de, a form of cursing. Think of it as the Chinese version of your mom, or similar. [4] even while being shaken, do not spit out the bird! (晃也不吐鸟) —huang ye butu niao, metaphor for not giving up even under duress.

Chapter 2: An Encounter Returning Home

The Fang Hua Beast is a primarily male animal with a peaceful disposition. It prefers to live alone and its figure is not much different to a mortal's. It is skilled in growing unusual, treasured medicinal herbs. Initially nameless, its flowers(hua) gave rise to Hua (or splendid), and the ancient name Fang Hua Beast. — 《Discussions of Yi Zhi》

"If you agree to come home with me, I'll give you three meals a day and promise you'll eat until you're full." The mild but innately tempting words of the male had the obvious markings of a kidnapper. His hand was very warm. A person had yelled at me once for being a smelly beggar, but no one had ever led me along like this.

Thus, the young and clueless me fell into enemy territory, led by food and his charms. For a trifling mantou, I shyly nodded my head and obediently allowed him to take me away. But my heart was surging like a river inside.

The main streets were rather chilly and occasionally, two or three shabbily-clothed people would breathe, eyes half-open, as they leaned against some stone steps. A little beggar wearing a rough burlap gown raised a hand to block the way ahead of him.

Geez... what for?

He's not thinking to stop and rob him, right? I raised my head, lifting my eyes to take a look at the beautiful person. He seemed to show no

interest, indifferent to asking or listening.

Although this other child had a filthy face, he looked intelligent and strong. A pair of dark, swarthy eyes stared at our hands as he half-jogged to follow along, trying to hold the beautiful person's hand. But the latter waved his sleeve and pushed him away. I thought he had a good temper, but it seems that wasn't so...

"Remember, I don't like coming in contact with people."

The leaves on the willow branches flew wildly, while a gentle breeze ruffled his sleeves. Beneath the sunlight, his face was so beautiful that it was hard for people to see clearly, as if a pale glow of moonlight shrouded him. He used this sort of soft manner to speak, even as his hand was firmly led me along

There was a delicate expression on his face.

I grew silent. He did as well, and without uttering a sound, led me along a fragrant lane towards the depths of a forest bordering the edge of civilization. I started to feel dread and tugged my hand free, wanting to run away. But the beautiful person only gripped it tighter.

Rumors went around that there were people who intentionally preyed on little urchins and used them as catamites in remote, out of the way places. I also heard that while the poor people had nothing to eat, some rich people bored of the same foods, enjoyed washing and steaming five or six-year-old children in a clear soup. Of course, this was also done in remote, out of the way places.

The whole time I followed, I was confused and shaking, my entire body weak.

I wasn't sure how long we walked. But by the time I was stumbling along to keep up, he lightly caught me up and carried me in his arms. It was an unexpectedly flattering favor that made me blank out.

"Don't move around."

The beautiful person emanated an unusually sweet scent that calmed the heart and made me drowsy. His warm, soft words continually echoed in my ear, "We're almost home."

There was something else he said afterward, as if it was very important. But I didn't hear as exhaustion poured over me like a sudden tide. Leaning against his warm embrace, I fell into a deep sleep.

I dreamed.

During the bitterest, coldest days of starvation, the old beggar had held me and said, Child born under an unlucky star, you should have been fortunate and wealthy. Endure and grit your teeth to pass through this... your mother will come to pick you up.

I dreamed for a long while, though I wasn't sure of all the details. When I opened my eyes again, I found myself lying on a carved wooden bed, staring up at the roof beams shaking... no, it was the bed that was shaking, with its warm, soft bedding that felt like an embrace. A surprisingly sweet scent appeared, and a sense of carefreeness swept

over me, but everything felt familiar...

I thought and thought...

A warm breath stroked my neck, at times slow or quick, but persistent. It felt unbearably ticklish. As soon as I turned over, I ran into a person's chest whose face was right before my eyes, giving me a severe shock.

The beautiful person was like jade parted by the clouds as he looked at me. He had phoenix eyes like lustrous jade, limpid and bright, that curved up slightly in the corners. Beneath the left eye, there was an exquisite cinnabar mole on the white skin, the red coloring as soul-stirring as a plum blossom in now.

My heart started to beat rapidly, and I starting staring at him for no reason. In all the time I had lived, I'd never seen a beautiful person who could dazzle with every look.

"Awake?" his voice was clear and melodious like cool spring water, but also gentle and soft like a woman's. The sound was a bit low but extremely pleasing to hear.

"Un." I faintly broke out of a trance, realizing I'd never looked at him so closely before. As I looked once again, I really had trouble figuring out whether he was male or female.

The old beggar said that my mother had a teardrop-shaped birthmark below her eye.

That there would come a day when she came for me.

Looking at his face, I dazedly gave out a silly giggle.

“Behind the house, there’s a clear spring, while your change of clothes is at the head of the bed. After cleaning yourself, come to the front room to eat.” He raised himself up with his hands and walked to the door, where he paused. “That smell on your body, if you can’t get rid of it... don’t come inside the house.”

I stared as he walked away, those white robes elegant and graceful, that fine, beautiful figure like the demeanor of a transcendent being. My head hung, and my heart trembled. Could it be...? Is it possible that I’ve met an Immortal?

It really was strange. Why did he pick me out of all those people?

Could it be that his compassion was like a Bodhisattva’s, and he couldn’t bear to see a group of grown-ups picking on a child? But he clearly treated that starving, dying beggar child on the streets with indifference and didn’t give him half a penny.

Unless...

He really wanted to foster a catamite or eat a child?

But the urchin that blocked his path on the way was much smarter, and looked much better than me. He even offered himself up, so it just wasn’t logical to pick me and not him.

My face was full of doubts.

After changing into my clothes, I observed my reflection in the mirror. There stood a thin and weak under-grown child wrapped up in oversized, draping clothing. No matter how much I washed, my face still looked a little dirty, and my hair was like withered and fallow like grass. It looked like I had a head full of feathers. No wonder that he left me a boy's robe, but no matter... since they were new clothes, I was content.

When I arrived in the front room, the beautiful person was already sitting there waiting with a bowl of white rice, fresh greens, tofu and a big bowl of red braised pork.

"Eat," he raised a finger to point at the dishes on the table.

Meat...

Meatmeatmeatmeatmeat.

Too busy to care about him, I picked up my chopsticks and swooped over, right hand trembling as I picked up the food to scarf it down like wolves and tigers. Vaguely I muttered, "You... aren't eating."

He only smiled at me but remained motionless, not picking up any chopsticks.

"I'm not used to eating these type of things." So speaking, he rose to

take a basin of fresh water and soaked his hand inside before leaving the room.

A strange person.

What kind of person wasn't used to eating food? Unless all of this was... especially cooked for me?

I smiled so much that my eyes turned into crescents.

It looked like this place wasn't bad.

Chapter 3: Foster Father Fang Hua

Were all Immortals so removed from the attractions of the mundane world?

I carried this question inside me for three days until I wanted to pound my head with my own fists. It was too oppressive.

Recently, the beautiful person always watched me eat before leaving. He would return to the residence after a long while, pleased, and then spend the entire afternoon reclining on a bamboo mat to doze.

Fang Hua never arranged any work for me to do, and spoke to me very little. He seemed to have thoroughly forgotten a person like me existed. Even if I tried to increase my popularity by wandering back and forth before him, he never looked directly at me. Despite this ill-treatment, he always arranged for three meals a day and waited upon me. It was as if I wasn't led here to be ordered about, but to enjoy a happy life filled with ease...

Seriously, what a weird guy...

—

Midday.

As usual, he cooked some dishes and placed them on the table.

Without even touching the chopsticks, he immediately ignored me to grab his robes and head out the door. I quickly swallowed a few mouthfuls of rice, used my sleeve to wipe my mouth and bent forwards, holding my breath as I tailed along behind him.

The house he built here was pretty out of the way. There weren't even any neighbors around, and a field of medicinal herbs grew behind the building. The shade of the green trees was dense beneath the summer sun and beneath it, a pond of water rippled with jade-green waves that gave people an immeasurably cool feeling.

A white-robed silhouette disappeared into the ancient forest.

Huh...

Weird, why did he slip into a place where the birds wouldn't even go to poop? Enduring the rays of the scorching sun, I broke into a run until I found and leaned against the back of an ancient tree. My neck craned around to look quietly.

Huh...

I saw the beautiful person rise to the sky with a leap, his image reflected in the pond below. The white robes were airy as his foot stepped lightly on the surface of the pool without stirring a ripple. Then, slender hands stretched forward to grab something I couldn't see as his body slowly floated to the ground, as lovely as an immortal's. Only now, there was the stem of a lotus flower in his hand.

Ah...I didn't know he could set the mood so well. Using qinggong[1] on a hot day to approach the water's surface and gather lotuses was pretty yuppie. At that time I really wanted to express the surging within my heart.

The beautiful person was like a painting, with long hair swirling in the air and flowers falling in riotous profusion. He flawlessly tore off the petals from the lotus flower...please take note, he tore them...and then stood up, placing them in his mouth as he began to chew.

His expression then was as if he was trying a delicate, delicious flavor of the mortal world.

I clung to the old tree, eyes wide as I watched this so-called immortal fly upwards. In the span of a second, he had gathered various flowers into his hands, settled into the tree, and stuffed them all into his mouth.

After seeing him move like floating clouds and flowing water, I became as dumbstruck as a wooden chicken. His table manners were refined, his lips slightly part in a way that radiated appeal. Even if he had been eating the Five Grains[2] or similar, he'd still look dazzling. Whoever heard of someone who ignored normal food in favor of such non-human things...

Wait, a proverb said: many esteemed men of noble character do not follow normal conventions. His high martial prowess definitely had something to do with his diet. Perhaps those flowers could improve the potency of one's inner energy?

Yes, that must be it.

My face filled with greed as I ran below his tree to squat on my heels, head raised. The only thing I was missing was a wagging tail. He lowered his head to look at me without a word, but the message in his eyes was obvious: why did you come here?

I feigned ignorance. He tilted his head to one side, still chewing. I stared fixedly, eagerly looking at him with adoring eyes.

"...you want to eat some?" He finally opened his mouth.

My eyes shone and I couldn't nod fast enough. He really was generous, because my palms had just reached out before he gave me an entire bunch of flowers. I bent my head to sniff them.

Sweet...

But I couldn't smell anything particularly extraordinary.

Earlier in the year when there was no food, I was even willing to eat tree bark. Yet I'd never ate flowers, because I couldn't tell between poisonous and non-poisonous types. Not to mention it felt unpleasant on the tongue.

This...

Perhaps it was different.

I copied Fang Hua, savoring the flavors of the pieces in my mouth before chewing fiercely. In a flash, I was struck speechless by the incomparably bitter taste. It was extremely distasteful, both harsh and astringent. The only other thing was a fragrant aroma that spread across my tongue.

These were just regular flowers, wasn't he just making himself suffer? Phooey...the entire root of my tongue turned numb...

His eyes curved.

Bully.

"Does it taste good?"

"Your mom! From the start, this wasn't fit for human consumption!"

"Correct." He gently propped up his head with a hand, half-reclining on the tree, the position giving off a feeling of high command as he looked at me. His almond-shaped phoenix eyes, accented by a mark shaped like a single tear, had a certain indescribable charm. "This isn't fit for human consumption."

Then, since he ate it...

Wasn't he mocking himself? Yet he seemed to be expounding on a truth.

In any case, it was hard to say. He looked respectable, and there were no emotions on his face. After looking at me for a while, he suddenly jumped off the tree, scattering crabapple cores all over the ground.

His expression was cold.

Ah...

Esteemed senior, you're not mad, right? My guaranteed financial support for the rest of my life, my white rice, will I watch as they all leave me like a bird...? If I had offended him, I'd probably need to return to that place where life was worse than death, and suffer the same days of unbearable hunger.

They say being too gutsy only got you bad ends.

Pulling up my robes, I anxiously hurried after him and caught him in an embrace from the back. He was very soft and warm, as well as fragrant... This feeling was like the one I remembered every night, calling to mind many different shades of the past. I cried out a word then that would make us tremble with laughter in the future.

"Mother..."

His body shook, as if frightened by me, and he tried to pry me loose.

I stood dumbfounded, knowing that I was in trouble.

Aye, how shameful. I hugged him tighter.

He seemed flustered, at a loss but unable to cast me aside. Afterward, he could only pat me gently to calm my sobbing before pulling me away. He knelt before me with a helpless gaze in his eyes, both indignant and distressed. "Listen, you can treat this as a home, but I'm not your mother... and also..." His low voice seemed to be mixed with a great effort to conceal something. "And also I'm a male, different from you humans. I am a Beast[3] and you can call me Fang Hua, but don't call me mother."

I blinked a few times, raising my head to look at him, and saw that the space between his eyebrows was weighed down with sorrow.

Sadly, I understood too little back then.

Many years later I came to regret, because in that moment I called him:

"Yifu[4]."

[1] qinggong (轻功) — qinggong, lightness technique, in which a cultivator is able to walk on air and water effortlessly.

[2] Five Grains (五谷) — wugu, in ancient times, the five fundamental cereals that included: rice, wheat, beans and two kinds of millet. [3] Beast (兽) — shou, animal, beast.

[4] yifi (义夫) — foster father, adoptive father

Chapter 4: Two or Three Interesting Incidents at Home

There were three important things that yifu did every day.

One, sleep. Those familiar with him knew as soon as he lied down in his clothes, he could doze for half the day without waking up.

Two, growing medicinal plants. After sleeping, he would use the remaining half of the day to plant small herbs and touch the young flowers.

Three, eating flowers. Though this step required very little time, he had to use more beforehand to cook my meals. So you can imagine that because of this, I still took one-third of the space in yifu's heart.

With a brush in my mouth, I pondered a bit.

After writing these things down in the regular script[1], I folded the Xuan paper[2] into three sections before stuffing it into a small box beneath my bed. It was almost half full of my little paper strips from daily calligraphy practice.

How dull...

I gave a long sigh before lying on my desk, hanging my head.

This was still a boy's robe, light purple in hue. The cool material, when worn in summer, made the skin felt refreshed and comfortable all over.

This had to be made from high-quality fabric, and yifu often wore clothes from the same make. But why was it another male garment, and why was it the wrong size? Kneeling on the chair, one hand propping myself up, I lifted the robes with one hand as I grabbed a bronze mirror off the wall to peer at my reflection.

My eyes looked like eyes, and my nose looked like a nose[1]. I squinted as I tugged forward the hairs atop my head for inspection...hn, the strands were so withered and sallow. After being nursed back to health, my face was rounder and more mellow these days, but the skin was still as dark as before.

When I used to be a beggar, there was no way to take baths, so everyone was dirty. It wasn't a big deal, but now that I lived with Fang Hua, who exuded a fragrant aroma every day and had skin like a pool of frosty snow, I couldn't help but feel inferior.

Actually, it wasn't such a big deal, it's just that he was as beautiful as a girl, whereas I was dirty like a boy... I didn't know why, no matter how I rubbed myself down with a damp towel, I simply couldn't get clean. And if I lowered my head to sniff myself...

There was still some type of smell.

Could it be I was just paranoid?

"Shao'er..." the pile of bedding next to me moved a bit.

I continued to pinch the skin atop my arm, spacing out a bit as I tidied

myself up.

"Shao'er, give me a drink of water." A head full of messy hair poked out of the bedcovers, following by a form with an alluring posture, the pillow in disarray on one side. His eyelashes were exceedingly long and trembled, while the bewitching cinnabar mark at the corner of an eye would startle all who saw him.

I nodded and fell down flat onto the ground with a clap. As I raised my head to wave, an affectionate gaze from a pupil that shone like moonlight gave me a rather pitying look.

My heart thumped wildly.

I randomly rubbed my hand on my clothes, quickly poured a cup of water, and carried it over in both hands.

"No wonder you're so unrefined," Fang Hua smiled, shaking his head in spite of himself. "Who would wipe their hand on their robes? The new clothes are dirty again."

"I won't dare to in the future," I honestly admitted my mistakes. "Next time I'll definitely wipe my hands clean before touching my clothes."

His mood seemed exhausted as he ignored me to drink his tea. I carried over a small wooden stool and sat in front of him, both hands supporting my chin as I watched like an idiot.

Strictly speaking, his positions while drinking the water were

exceedingly beautiful: one hand holding it in his palm, the other using his sleeve to shield half his face, every gesture evoking the aura of an elite noble gentleman.

I studied his appearance and patterns until he looked sideways at me and spat in my face.

...in between the good feelings, surprise rose. I gave him a look full of profound meaning. He lowered his head and coughed, shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

"Yifu," I used my sleeve to wipe my face, but after noticing his slant-eyed stare, consciously pulled out a small handkerchief from my robes, shaking it a few times before continuing to wipe....hn, a deep sigh. This was definitely water from him. There was a deep flowery fragrance floating in the water as I clicked my tongue to speak, "Why do you always call me Shao'er?"

He seemed stupefied. "Did you have a name before?"

"No."

He called me little ragamuffin, beggar, and urchin, but these didn't count as names...

"Then it's correct," he gave me an askance look, before reclining leisurely to speak. "That hairclip you're wearing at the back of your bun is just like those little hair ornaments with the handle of a shao[4] (spoon). Don't you think this name is pretty good?"

This time, I was tired to the point of exhaustion. He suddenly smiled and gave me an embrace.

"Your name is Shao Hua[5]."

He kept hugging me like this without moving until I was crushed to a point where I couldn't breathe. At that time, I looked up at him to see his eyes closed, lost in sleep.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh.....

I was furious.

—

This yifu resembled an Immortal, but after a while, you'd realize that besides his three things, he couldn't take care of himself at all. On one day, I finally received another new set of robes even larger than last time, with the sleeves dragging on the ground. It drove me beyond the limits of patience.

"Yifu, these clothes are too big."

"That's what I told the shopkeeper too, but he said children grow very fast so you can also wear this in the future."

You didn't need to buy me clothes for five years in advance...I cry...

"Yifu, could you not buy this style next time?"

He raised an eyebrow to stare at me.

I showed off my undeveloped chest, and firmly stared into his eyes as I spoke. "I'm a girl..."

He seemed to have half-understood. "So then?"

There was no way to communicate with him.

I thought he was pretending to be stupid. Later on, I discovered he had no knowledge of women from the start. This conclusion came three days after this incident.

I was holding back the whole way before running into the forest. Lowering my head, I rustled and undid my waistband, squatting down in a straddling position. After watering the flowers and grass, I stretched upwards, refreshed, and immediately came face-to-face with a wide-eyed Fang Hua.

"Do you have an unmentionable disease somewhere?"

"Ah?"

"Why do you squat, wouldn't you wet yourself that way?"

"Yifu, I'd only wet myself if I stood to do it."

"How could this be...? Let me take a look for you." After speaking, he seriously made a move to lift up my robes.

I gave a start, feeling anything but reassured, and stopped talking to turn away and flee. However...I forgot the most important thing.

He had internal energy[6].

A rock hit a certain spot on my shoulder before bouncing to the ground. In that moment my entire body turned stiff and I fell over, unable to move. I only felt a pair of hands lift me up by the waistband, tug down my trousers and...

Inside, I was crying.

He actually examined me with his hands before unsealing my movements with the same shoulder tap. I escaped his clutches as soon as I hit the ground, but he walked over with sympathy flooding his eyes. "When did you castrate yourself?"

I remained sullen.

Seeing that I wouldn't answer, he nodded understandingly and walked away, quietly speaking to himself. "So these are the enunchs I've read about in books...they really are a little different from ordinary people."

“All of them are missing that thing.”

I was stunned until my anger made my whole body tremble.

For Mother’s sake, was he done humiliating people yet?

I AM A GIRL!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

[1]regular script (小楷) —also known as xiao kai, a type of calligraphic script that appeared in 200CE and used in most modern writings today. The characters are known to be uniform and regular, making it neat and easy to read.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regular_script and
<https://www.google.com/search?q=%E5%B0%8F%E6%A5%B7%E5%AD%97%E5%B8%96&espv=2&biw=1280>

[2]Xuan paper (宣纸) — a type of high quality paper made in Xuancheng (the City of Xuan) in Anhui Province, especially good for traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy.

[3] eyes...like eyes, nose...like a nose (眼是眼, 鼻是鼻) —yanshiyan, bishishi, meaning that there was nothing strange or deformed about her features, but she looked like any person would.

[4]shao (勺) —as noted, Chinese for spoon.

[5]Shao Hua (勺嬋) — literally “beautiful spoon”. Keep in mind that the Hua in Shao’er’s name has a 女 character on the side to add a touch of femininity to the character. It also differs from Fang Hua’s character, which

is 华. While hers denotes beauty, his implies magnificence and splendor. Naming people with homonyms is quite common and can sometimes be quite clever. I wonder if Fang Hua picked this one on purpose.

[6]internal energy (内功) — neigong, circulated by cultivators and used as a source of their supernatural powers.

Chapter 5: Drunk on Wine

I never knew the differences between Beasts (shou) and humans. Was it that humans ate the Five Grains while a Fang Hua Beast understood the taste of flowers? Yifu was nicer to me than any other person in the world. He was a Fang Hua Beast, but still prettier than any human girl.

Every year on the tenth day of the tenth month, yifu would always go by himself somewhere and return tired and sleepy. His snow-white boots would be caked with yellow mud as well as a thick odor of incense wood. Then, he'd spent an entire day in his room alone to drink away his sorrows. At that time, he resembled any one of those lovesick, spurned young men. But I enjoyed seeing him drinking, because only then would he act like an ordinary person, wanton and self-indulgent.

Yifu really was pretty.

A small lamp emanated a pale yellow light, gentle and mild. The cinnabar mole beneath the corner of Fang Hua's eye was red like fire. The shadow of his eyelashes covered up his pupils, while the space between his eyebrows tried its best to conceal his worry. Like this, he poured himself a cup of wine to enjoy, each movement filled with unrestrained refinement.

I remember someone once told me that a mole beneath the eye shaped like a teardrop meant that person would have a life full of misfortunes and frustration.

Fang Hua's alcohol tolerance was not good. Even so, he talked more after he drank.

"Isn't there a saying among mortals? That one moment of intoxication can separate you from 1,000 woes? Why can't I get drunk even after 1,000 cups?" He swayed and tried to point at me, but found that he couldn't stay still. So he waved his sleeve and gave up the useless motion, continuing to pour the jug of wine in his mouth. His clothes were already soaked.

He still has enough face to call himself sober, I scoffed.

My chopsticks picked up a piece of radish^[1] and wrapped it in a mantou before placing it in my mouth. Lifting my eyes, I spared him a glance before knocking against the table. "Yifu, why are you wasting wine? It took so much work to brew half that jug."

He froze, stupefied, but it took a long time before he understood and sat down with the jug in a protective embrace. Two pupils swept over me in an overwhelming moment of sorrow. "You smelly rascal, I raised you for two years, but it still looks like you're not even worth a jug of wine."

Tch.

Keep drinking.

You've raised me for two years but still can't tell that I'm female.

I shook in mirth as I gave him a sidelong glance. He was blabbering

loudly with one foot on the bench, body stretched out as he raised his sleeve to pick up a giant piece of meat with his chopsticks. Next, he chomped a vicious bite of mantou to stuff in his mouth.

A lady doesn't lower herself to the same standards as a drunkard.

Suddenly a pair of jade-slender hands shot out to press down upon my sleeves. Before I could react, he groped downwards. Startled, goosebumps rose on my skin and—

—I loudly cried out, “Not good!”

Those delicate, flawless hands wrapped around my chopsticks. His sudden tug caused my body to ram into the corner of the table, the impact right on two areas of flesh. Pain made me suck in a deep breath.

...I teared up.

Will this affect my growth? I already looked like a tomboy. I glared at him, my precedent of bad luck[2].

“For two years you’ve eaten this and that, aren’t you fed up with it by now?” Fang Hua knitted his eyebrows. He was drunk, and after staring at the meat for awhile, lowered chopsticks to put an oily piece in his mouth.

Ahhhhhhhhhhh.....

This guy deserves to die, he’s fooling around with me again.

I opened my eyes wide and looked at him. "You're not allowed to spit it out."

His expression changed to one of extreme sullenness. In the end, he still swallowed. Don't joke with me. Who knew how expensive meat was nowadays?

"...it still tastes as bad as I remembered."

"A flower-muncher like you shouldn't try to eat meat like me. If you're not used to it, don't snatch it from me the next time your drunkenness gets the best of you."

"Actually, someone fed me this in the past," he threw the chopsticks aside and plopped onto the bench. With his sleeves fanning out, he sprawled on the table as his voice lowered to a subtle noise. "The taste wasn't so hard to stomach then."

Ah.

A heaven-shattering revelation. I swooped over to ask, "Yifu, who was it that fed you?"

He raised his head in disappointment, eyes slack. "It's been a very long time, long enough for me to already forget that person."

Forgive me. My face can't hold back its look of disbelief.

He suddenly smiled and gathered himself together. Spreading out his sleeves, he scooped me into his lap. Drunkenness must have been contagious, because even I was a little giddy. Fang Hua's head rested on my neck, his shiny, crow-black hair messily scattered over my body. Yet his voice was gentle and soft like a woman's, an ancient spring breeze that had birthed life for a long time, whose caresses stirred my heart. His eyelashes trembled with laden sorrow, and the cinnabar mark beneath his eye was like a teardrop, startling to see.

He said, "This expression of yours is very similar to his..."

He'd never used this sort of voice to speak to me before.

Those arms held me tighter, warm breath brushing past my face with an intoxicating, sweet scent. It felt as if my ears were burning, and I could only hear my heart thumping from where he held me in his arms. Fang Hua must have been grieving right now. Who was he trying to reach again through embracing me...? Suddenly, I felt even more anxious than before.

"Yifu, you're drunk." I don't know where I found the burst of strength to push him away.

There was the sound of a chair falling over.

He fell on the ground and laughed. The teardrop-shaped mole trembled, and Fang Hua laughed until his breath caught before betraying an expression weighed down with sorrow. "...nonsense, if it's me, I can drink 1,000 cups without getting drunk."

Something in my heart became a little harder to bear.

I didn't even know what had provoked him in the first place as I knelt with the intention of pulling him up. But he dragged me instead and flipped over, the two of us falling on the long and narrow bed[3].

Ahhhh

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?!

He hugged me and said in a quiet, lonely voice, "Stay with your yifu in bed for a night."

I swallowed a few times and stared at his pretty, excessively beautiful woman-like face. My heart beat wildly, and my eyes hurriedly looked elsewhere. My fists clenched and unclenched, full of sweat.

Really...just sleeping?

However, with this undeveloped body, the most I could be was a long pillow for him. As it turned out, his eyes closed as he kept a stubborn hold on me. For a long time, his breaths were long and even, as if he really was falling asleep.

"Yifu, can you bring me with you on the tenth day of the tenth month

next year?" I tugged at his sleeve, raising my head to look at his face.

"Un," was the soft, one-word reply, but that too was a promise.

The color of the moon was like tidewater pouring on his body, and a fragrant aroma mixed with the smell of alcohol to fill the room. The man next to me was my yifu, whose looks rivaled an entire city.

But...

The only thing I forgot was that he tended to forget things with his low alcohol tolerance.

I've never seen such an ethereal-looking person sleep so unwell. He tossed and turned me back and forth, squashing me against the wall the whole night, pain wracking my entire body while he had nightmares.

The next day he woke up with me in his arms.

I lifted my eyelids to look at him, waiting to see his reaction and explanation for forcing an underage youth into the criminal act of sleeping with him. As it turned out, he gave me a side glance and said carelessly, "I don't like coming in contact with people."

After saying this line, he did nothing more beyond maintaining his embrace. It was as if he meant to make it clear that next time, you shouldn't slip away from me.

I was furious!

"Yifu, you can't tolerate alcohol and that's why you dragged me to bed."
I rolled my eyes.

"Nonsense again." He pushed me aside and slowly got up, shaking his head with the expression of an elder who had no choice but to speak to a brat.

I was so shocked I could only stare tongue-tied.

With a frosty face, he grabbed a bronze mirror and began to comb his hair. Suddenly leaning in, he stuck a finger out from his spacious sleeve to rub at the shiny gloss on his lips.

He thought for a bit before slowly turning his body, propping his head on a hand and speaking uncertainly. "Shao'er, how many times have I told you? The next time yifu drinks wine, don't make me eat meat."

I'm begging you, don't steal my meat next time.

"What kind of expression are you making? Yifu wouldn't lecture you with no reason. Wrong things are wrong."

I had no words.

Tears...

“Also, why do I smell like alcohol?” he stood up, sniffing his sleeves, his face as luminous and cool as the full moon. However, the look in his eyes was a bit less doting. “Shao’er, this would be you in the wrong. Although we have a lot of fermented glutinous rice[4], you shouldn’t trick me by bathing in it...”

I suddenly stood up and kicked a stool.

Ahh

...this person deserved to die.... ..

For Mother's sake, I'd rather call myself Piao[5] instead of Shao before I brew wine for you next time!

[1]radish (萝卜) —luobu, keep in mind these are probably pickled [white radishes](#) similar to Japanese daikon, not the little red things we see in Western salads. These usually have a mild flavor with a sort of sharp, spicy aftertaste, and are good eaten raw or with a little bit of seasoning like salt or sugar.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daikon>

[2]precedent of bad luck (始作俑者) —a sign of bad luck or a bad beginning, the exact idiom here originates from Confucianism. It refers to a person who first made tomb figures. Confucius condemned their use because the figures looked like people. 「始作俑者，其无后乎？」shi zuo yong zhe, qi wu hou hu? "Didn't the first man who made tomb figures die without leaving a heir?"

[3]couch bed (榻) —also called [a ta](#), used as a bed or a couch in a pinch. Resembles the ancient Chinese equivalent of a lounge chaise. They're not very tall because they were usually raised on platforms within a room. You can read more about Chinese couch beds here, and Chinese furniture here.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_furniture

[4]fermented glutinous rice (酒酿) —also known as [jiu niang](#), a type of sweet sticky rice with trace amounts of alcohol typically eaten during a Chinese winter holiday. It's quite tasty and almost a bit fizzy, thanks to the fermentation process. Also safe for kids to eat!

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jiuniang>

[5]Piao (飘) —a bit of a pun here. Piao and Shao obviously sound the same, but piao means to float, flit, or even fly/flee away. So Shao'er would rather run off than do Fang Hua the favor of wine brewing again.

Chapter 6: First Encounter with the Red Wood

The tenth day of the tenth month.

I had finally waited a full year.

I endured to the breaking point. Though my memory was good, there was no way to say what I wanted, even though I'd gotten to the point where I had learned it by heart. This was all Fang Hua's fault because he easily forgot things he said before.

Fang Hua said, if someone stopped caring about something, they wouldn't think about it all the time. If someone forgot about it completely, it wasn't something to regret, but a type of joy.

Hard to understand, right?

For a person like him who either said nothing, or a bunch of words and phrases that were difficult to understand—I preferred to ignore him.

I sucked in a breath. Sticking my hand in my sleeve, I casually took another glance at the almanac. Today was the tenth day of the tenth month. It was a big day because the agreement between us on the night he got drunk was set for this day. Even if he tried to cheat me, I'd still follow the results to the end.

Early morning, he got out of bed while I quietly sat on a stool in my room with a small bag, observant and hopeful. Then I heard the sound of

the house door closing. Forgetting myself in a moment of excitement, I hooked my bag with a long, thin branch before swinging it on my shoulder and dashing after him.

This was the manner in which I followed behind him at some distance away.

He walked along a very remote, out-of-the-way path where the bamboo grew tall and graceful. The emerald green stalks resembled a heavenly cage and gave a slight chill to the air. His pale violet silhouette was hidden from view within the forest, and he often raised a hand to his brow to wipe off the sweat. Occasionally, a breeze blew up his sleeves, giving him a distinctive demeanor.

I went step by step carefully amongst the dead branches. At times, the branch on my shoulder clacked against the bamboo stalks, making a loud noise. But Fang Hua didn't seem to notice a thing. From my observations, he seemed driven to distraction.

It was very easy to go past the bamboo. Their scent assaulted my senses along with a mix of medicinal herbs and flowers, stirring my spirits. I straightened my chest and sucked in a deep breath. Right then, his form seemed to shrink down before disappearing.

I was shocked. Tossing my bag aside, I hurried forward on hands and knees to find him, tripping and stumbling in my haste. Finally, I landed with my butt in the air...

There was an overhanging cliff, and the end of the bamboo forest fell short of its edge. Below was a valley whose plains and mountainsides

were covered in flowers. He deftly flew down with graceful bearing, sleeves fluttering lightly behind him like a spray of purple mist, beautiful beyond compare.

Aiya[1], for Mother's sake...no wonder he was traveling without a care in the world if anyone tried to tail him.

It was because he was certain other people couldn't follow him down.

What now? Even if I made a rope with my bag to climb down, even if I used up all the fig leaves available, it still wouldn't be long enough. I couldn't bear it anymore and kicked with my foot, wiggling my butt as I scrambled backward.

The most I could do was lie there and look.

Actually, my field of vision really wasn't bad from this far up. Nestled within the medicinal plants and mystical flowers was a section of yellow soil, from which rose a small hill like a burial mound.

Fang Hua stood in that spot, listless.

After a long time had passed, he slowly bowed and took a step atop the mound. He looked quite dashing and spirited with one hand resting on a knee, the other reaching forward to lightly stroke something.

Such an irreverent posture, but one that radiated an aura of deep grief.

His hand gave such gentle touches, as if writing something from memory upon a small piece of fiery-red dead wood stuck within the yellow earth. I narrowed my eyes before rubbing them, but had to give up trying to read something so difficult. I shifted to carefully study his face, and was astonished. After staying with him for all these years, I'd never seen him look so lonely. He seemed to have sunk into his own memories and trapped himself there, absorbing the reminiscences of past years. The sole exception was that his finger, still gently stroking that piece of red wood...

A smile appeared on his face, but the tear-shaped mole made it seem like he was crying.

It was only after many, many years that I knew that wood was Fang Hua Wood. Because afterwards, someone told me a chunk of Fang Hua Wood was a Fang Hua Beast. It was just that the Fang Hua Beast had transformed into wood and then withered up.

[1]aiya (哎呀) —a common Chinese interjection along the lines of 'aish!' or 'sheesh!'

Chapter 7: Fang Hua Beast

After returning from the bamboo forest, my spirits were very low, as if I had ruined some secret. But I couldn't figure out where I was in the wrong. This sensation was like a fish bone lodged in my throat, giving my entire body an unspeakably uncomfortable feeling. The house was empty and deserted.

Fang Hua hadn't returned yet...

With a small exhale, I went to the kitchen and soaked some cold rice in water. My head remained bowed as I rolled up my sleeves, docilely preparing my dinner. After eating my fill, my stomach felt even worse and my heart was completely empty. All I wanted was to find some work to do.

We'd long split enough logs for the firewood.

We'd collected enough water, too.

I could only prop up my chin with my hand and space out in the courtyard.

Fang Hua always had a magnanimous expression when he reproached me, saying I slept too much, or that I was too lazy, or that other people had filial sons while he was stuck raising a self-professed elder.

Actually, even if I got out of bed before dawn to roll up my sleeves and get to work, I'd discover the kitchen fire was already lit, the clean clothes hung up to dry and everything else finished within the house. I knew he wanted to spare me from doing such heavy work. Yifu was a good person, even if he always thought one way and acted another. I wanted to stay with him for the rest of my life.

The sky gradually grew darker.

I tilted my head towards the door, but Fang Hua still wasn't back.

Some stems of medicinal plants had already ripened, and many flowers had bloomed, but they didn't smell as fragrant as they usually did. It looked like things here were much lonelier with one less person.

Ahhhhhhhhhhh...

Annoying.

I dragged over a broom and ran towards the study. I kicked open the door and—

—grew blank-faced.

This was what they called a mess. Multiple books were missing from the racks, some fallen to the floor or across the desk, and a big chunk of space was taken up by papers...

Ah, a rare event.

I couldn't even tell that yifu could be such a idle and carefree person. Was he trying to compose a poem or paint a picture here? Even though the papers were held in place by an inkstone, the wind outside the window blew against its surfaces, lifting up a few sheets and make them tremble as they rustled.

A brush laid quietly on one side, the ink on its tip half-drying.

I went to take a closer look and saw a completed painting. There were mountains and water, and a distinguished male youth in the middle of playing the qin[1]. A teardrop-shaped mole beneath his eye caught my attention. His red robes made an extremely tasteful scene.

Between the land of cloudy mountains and rivers, a moon hung high in the skies. One could just make out the outline of a figure on the opposite shore of the river. However, there was only a faint sketch of that person's face, and the easy flowing brush stopped here, unable to continue.

I hesitated for a moment, but was too afraid to touch it. Instead, I collected the scattered books in my arms and gave them a glance, preparing to arrange them all in categories.

In the middle of brushing my sleeves aside...

A length of tough silken cloth floated out to land on the desk, like water flowing gently as it tumbled towards the ground.

The sudden excitement I felt made me curious. Logically speaking, secrets were hidden in books: if not love poems or popular songs, then secret martial arts manuals. I bent forwards and scooped the cloth up in my hands.

Glancing out the door, I saw that yifu still hadn't returned yet.

I shook open the cloth scroll, scattering dust everywhere, before spreading it out across my palms.

The lighting was a bit dim...

I couldn't see very clearly, but felt that everything was densely packed together. There were very delicate, fine characters written neatly across the work.

I hadn't been able to find the flint for half a day, so I had no way to light the lamps. Still holding up the object, I walked straight to the window and saw a thin, warm ray of moonlight. Fortunately, it shone right upon my piece of silk.

'The Fang Hua Beast is a primarily male animal with a peaceful disposition. It prefers to live alone and its figure is not much different from a mortal's. It is skilled in growing unusual, treasured medicinal herbs. Initially nameless, its flowers (hua) gave rise to Hua (or splendor) and the ancient name Fang Hua Beast.'

Ah...

Fang Hua Beast?

Wasn't this talking about yifu?

I narrowed my eyes and leaned against the wall, raising my sleeves as I lifted the length of silk closer to the light to continue reading.

'The Fang Hua Beast is taciturn and often has still and silent expressions. Its white skin resembles that of a woman, and it exudes an unusually sweet scent all year round. Beneath its eyes and eyebrows is a cinnabar mole, and the color of its teardrop-shaped mark pales according to youth. Upon reaching blackish-red, dim red, or pitch-black, the Fang Hua Beast will flee. After fleeing it turns into a sea, then transforms into a piece of dead wood called Fang Hua Wood. This is considered the Fang Hua Beast's soul, and it is capable of dispelling tens of thousands of poisons on Earth. If one buries the wood in the dirt, and feeds it a mixture of crushed medicinal herbs mixed with dew touched by the first rays of the morning sun, one month later the dead wood will be as red as fire, with the disposition of jade.

Two months later, the wood will grow four branches, and its color will fade. Three months later, the wood will develop the five senses of a human adult, whereupon the wood will turn soft and supple, white without compare. Four months later, the root of the wood will break, and the Fang Hua Beast will be born. If the Beast grows to be ten months old, use true love's blood to wash it daily so its soul can continue to exist. This will help the young Beast recall its memories from a previous incarnation.

A young newborn Beast does not know human language and eats flower nectar as well as a small amount of medicinal herbs. But he grows very quickly, and in half a year will appear no different from a young

child. His language skills will become fluid and smooth, and he will become exceedingly intelligent. Afterwards, its every ten days will be equivalent to a cycle of one year in human terms as it continues to mature.

Fang Hua Beasts are animals who possess pure feelings. If adult Beasts can maintain a heart of clarity in the world of mortals, they can extend their longevity and cultivate to become Immortals. Those who are moved by sentiment[2] end up as grassy weeds, withering year by year, bathing in a sea of fire until they return to the cycle of reincarnation. If they are injured by sentiment, its every ten days will be equivalent to a cycle of one year in human terms, and it will sink into the cycle of reincarnation, turning back into dead wood. If they are heavily injured by sentiment, the color of the wood will turn black, and act as a strong toxic agent for poisons.'

Fang Hua have an exceedingly unrivaled beauty resembling that of a woman's, that is difficult to find in the world. As an animal that possesses a sentimental disposition, they will be tied down by the threads of sentiment all their lives. Those who cannot escape the bonds of sentiment are robbed of their lives and die young, leaving the numbers who manage to attain Right Fruit[3] fewer and fewer.'

Ah...

So it was like this... ...I clutched my head. This wasn't written like vernacular speech.

I can't understand it...

Again I clutched at my head. This wasn't a secret martial arts manual, nor did it resemble a love poem or similar things. It was a pity I didn't usually put in much effort studying, so my literacy rate was too low. I sucked in a deep breath and prepared to fold it carefully so I could replace it in the original place. But suddenly a voice came in from the window.

"What are you doing?"

The voice was neither high or low, nor fast or slow, but possessed a level of severity I'd never heard before.

[1]qin (琴) —a seven-stringed plucked instrument similar in some ways to the zither. In ancient times, qin strings used silk or other soft materials; metal strings are a relatively modern invention, made after the world got a bit too noisy. ^^;

[2]sentiment (情) —this is something to describe the entire realm of human feelings/emotions/attachments. Cultivators shouldn't be attracted to things in the mundane world if they want to ascend to immortality, those who are can be said to be lost/entrapped by qing, or sentiment, whether it be bonds between people or unresolved feelings in their hearts. More or less.:)

[3]Right Fruit (正果) —a cultivation status in Buddhist belief that occurs right before enlightenment.

Chapter 8: Love Oath

"What are you doing?"

The voice was neither high or low, nor fast or slow, but possessed a level of severity I'd never heard before.

My agitation surpassed the level of anxiety I would've held upon capturing a demon. Raising my head, I came face-to-face with him. The object slid out of my hands, and a single step had it lying beneath my feet, where my tediously oversized robes conveniently hid it from view.

Looks like even ill-fitting robes had their advantages.

Hurriedly, I clasped my hands behind my back, raising my head as I straightened up and thrust out my chest. With an affected tone, I spoke. "Yifu, so you're back...you're really early today."

I gave a glance outdoors.

A round moon hung high in the sky, looking down upon his face. I laughed a little ridiculously, because actually...it wasn't early at all. The sky was already dark. In other words, he'd been outside an entire day.

"What are you doing in my study?"

I uneasily took a step back, my robes swaying around me.

"It was messy here, so I thought I'd straighten things up."

He kicked aside the door and walked inside, eyes looking past me to sweep over the length of paper on his desk, exactly where my hand was pointing.

Curses, I just laughed out loud.

Before I could withdraw my hand, he caught it in his grip unsteadily. Thus, I was half dragged, half pulled out of the room.

Under the moonlight, his body seemed to emanate a soft, pale glow, but his expression was neither cold nor warm.

This kind of Fang Hua was someone I wasn't familiar with.

He always repressed and glossed over his feelings of depression, making it hard for people to read him. But I could tell from the way he was holding me today that right now he felt restless and disturbed, as well as lonely...

And then, when I raised my head to take a sniff, there was the faint scent of alcohol.

He'd stolen wine to drink again.

"You should already know..." He seemed to be conscious of my expression, his pupils clear and cold as they swept over me. "I don't like other people touching my things."

"Shao'er understands." I hastily nodded my head.

A corner of his mouth raised up, as if he was smiling.

But I just lowered my head and tugged on my sleeves, revealing my hands. "Yifu doesn't like coming in contact with people."

So...I'm begging you, let go.

"Where are you going?" His grip on my hand was warm, as if reluctant to part with me.

Huh...

Once he drank, he talked more and became clingy. My eyes spun, and with a cheeky grin I replied, "I'm going to find more wine for you."

He stared fixedly at me with a small smile, eyes curved like crescent moons.

Hmph...

You can drink to death.

I squatted down to dig out the earthen jugs of wine I'd buried beneath a willow tree. Hiding my mouth behind my sleeves, I burst out in sneaky laughter.

With a memory like Fang Hua's, he'd forget everything by tomorrow morning, so there was no way he'd blame me anymore. I neatly arranged the jugs of wine together. These were all from recipes given to me by Fang Hua. I used flowers and honey to distill the wine, so it really was precious...

Nevertheless, I decided to go all out, and picked the largest jug of wine.

Then I went into an inner room to grab a big porcelain bowl and arranged everything on the stone table in the courtyard, genially smiling as I sat on one side, chin resting on my hands, staring at him.

I've always thought I was the smartest person in the world. It was only later on that I discovered that intelligence could be foiled by itself, too.

I finally understand the saying, staying sober even after 1,000 cups.

Fang Hua poured himself alcohol and drank, bowl after bowl. He smelled like a mix of flowers and the faint, mellow flavor of wine, caught up in a breeze that drifted over to even make me a little tipsy.

It seemed like the more he drank, the more vigorous he became.

An indifferent, yet slightly worried expression spread from the space between his eyebrows to a quiet sorrow. Looking at him made one ache pittingly.

Perhaps the moonlight bewitched people.

Perhaps I too, was drunk.

Unexpectedly, I raised my head and got closer, asking him sadly, "Yifu, were you paying respects to the tomb today? What was that bleak patch of yellow soil doing in a mountain full of medicinal plants?"

He gave a start, and I knew I'd started a disaster. Wasn't this outright admitting I'd followed him...?

"Shao'er, do you want to hear a story?" The cinnabar mole beneath a corner of his eye glimmered with soft light. Though he was drunk, he still seemed clear-headed. "Someone I used to know very well once fell in love with a person unable to return his feelings[1]."

Ah...

He looked at me and smiled, gently nodding his head before drinking another cup.

"The person he loved already had a wife, but he was still attracted to that person like a moth to a flame. The second half of his life was spent in grief so heavy that he wished he was dead. His eventual death was miserable, and he was buried far from humans, surrounded by nothing

but flowers as he sank into an eternal sleep.”

He reached out a hand to touch my cheeks, the look in his eyes growing more and more distant as he slowly leaned closer. “I just don’t understand...the mortals all say that the Fang Hua Beast is an animal capable of feelings, but they can never obtain their heart’s desire.”

I turned my head, heart suddenly pounding.

A Fang Hua Beast is a primarily male animal. If his friend fell in love with a person who had a wife, then wouldn’t that person have been a man?

Perhaps, it was a cut sleeve affair[2]...?

No wonder society couldn’t accept it, it was too shocking.

I didn’t even know how to follow up with what he said...

The Fang Hua at that moment seemed even lonelier under the light of the moon. He slowly stood up, his white robes dancing in the wind as if it’d whisk him away in a moment.

“Yifu...” I gripped his sleeve tightly. After a long while, I could only speak hoarsely. “You’re different. If anyone picks on you, Shao’er will risk her life to kill them.”

He slowly raised his eyebrows but said nothing, only sighed slightly as he silently gazed up at the moon in the heavens. The splendor of that

moon gleamed down in torrents upon his jade-like face, its features dimly discernible and almost unreal. "You don't understand again..."

That face leaned closer towards me, and those lips slowly pressed upon mine.

Startled, I was even afraid to move an inch.

Ahh..

[illegible]

Now what was going on?!

His dejected body fell towards the ground, crushing me beneath him.
The impact made my head hurt.

I suddenly gave a start.

I wasn't of age yet...

Another long while passed before I realized he'd fallen asleep.

I propped myself up into a sitting position and gathered my arms around yifu, carefully and cautiously stroking the satiny strands of long hair that had scattered across his back. My hands gradually tightened as I held him.

A teardrop-shaped mole decorated the corner of an eye in a startling shade of crimson red.

Suddenly, the words from the length of silk cloth appeared in my mind.

‘Fang Hua have an exceedingly unrivaled beauty resembling that of a woman, that is difficult to find in the world. As an animal that possesses a sentimental disposition, they will be tied down by the threads of sentiment all their lives. Those who cannot escape the bonds of sentiment are robbed of their lives and die young, leaving the numbers who manage to attain Right Fruit fewer and fewer.’

Yifu, you raised me.

Shao'er promises, even if I have to put her life on the line, I will protect you.

As long as you, are happy...

[1]unable to return his feelings (不能托付終身) —bu neng tuofu zhongshen is hard to fit in one sentence. Bu neng means unable or unwilling to, tuofu means to entrust, or commit to someone's care, zhongshen means lifelong, all one's life. Putting it together means that Fang Hua's friend loved a person who couldn't be relied on to stay by his side for a lifetime. ...you can imagine how clunky that sentence would've been, so I used a little cheat and a footnote to bring you here instead.

[2]cut sleeve (斷袖) —duan xiu, euphemism for homosexuality that comes from Western Han Dynasty (206BCE – 9 CE). At that time, Emperor Ai (real name Liu Xin) took on a male lover named Dong Xian. One morning before attending his daily court sessions, the emperor discovered Dong Xian had fallen asleep on his sleeve. Not wishing to wake him up, he used a knife to cut away part of the cloth, and left. The so-called passion of the cut sleeve stems from these times.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Han_dynasty

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emperor_Ai_of_Han

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dong_Xian

Chapter 9: A Peeper Betrayed

Spring left and came again, and the years flowed like water between the fingers, escaping all attempts to grasp them. Pear blossoms burst wantonly into bloom, inviting a delicate fragrance into the courtyard.

In the blink of an eye, I had passed a few more years at this house. Fang Hua naturally forgot the events of that night, and I was all too happy to take advantage of the slip. I never brought up the words on the silk cloth again, and the two of us spent our lives peacefully until one day, I discovered that I'd grown quite tall.

The robe I'd worn in prior years seemed more and more fitting to my body, except for its tightness across the chest. I also felt depressed these days. When I was changing my clothes, I once hit against my chest and felt a sharp pain.

My body these days was really weird. It seemed like it was changing, but I couldn't tell in what way.

I didn't pay it much attention, because all the little ills and pains in this house were nothing to worry about. Even without mentioning the field of rare and precious plants behind the building because the house, I had Fang Hua, who could concoct all sorts of miraculous cures.

Fang Hua loved to fiddle with the plants and flowers.

He also once told me that medicinal plants and flowers all had their

own set of seasons and years. Once that time that passed and they faded, they would be useless. Actually, it was a pity because they could only continue living on as refined pills. But we simply had too many plants in our backyard, so only the relatively rarer ones were picked to be refined.

Every time he finished speaking, he would wear a regretful expression on his face.

But I couldn't understand how mixing together all these medicinal plants, smashing them to bits, and mixing them with different powders to form into round pills... ..

...could do anything to prolong their lives.

Supposing they were human, getting pulverized like that would've killed them until even their bones disappeared.

I really didn't understand a guy like Fang Hua.

Even though I said that, I could well imagine how many different types of rare medicinal ingredients were gathered by him and placed into the beautiful collection of bottles and flasks in the house. These things were precious beyond compare, and a single grain was worth more than ten taels^[1] of gold.

Even so, I occasionally made off with one or two jars and dumped the contents in my mouth like soy beans to satisfy my cravings for a good snack.

Fortunately, he only turned a blind eye to these things.

Sigh... ..

It became hard to sleep with my endless suffering.

I could only lie there stiffly. Turning my body, I beat against my chest...

Seriously, this was so oppressing.

For Mother's sake...

It was fine if I didn't hit it, but when I did the pain was enough to make my eyes leak tears.

Pulling open my robes to peer inside, I couldn't tell if I was being paranoid, or if my chest was really starting to swell a bit.

Could it be that the warm weather, combined with too much water I drank before sleeping, caused my body to bloat?

I bent my arm and gave it a glance, but it looked normal.

In one motion I got up and grabbed the mirror off the short table[2]. The bright yellow hue of bronze dazzled me to a point where I couldn't open my eyes. I felt my face all over to ascertain that it was the same as before, besides the fact that my skin tone was lighter.

Ahh.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

It was no use, I couldn't fall asleep no matter how much I tossed and turned. I might as well sneak into Fang Hua's room and steal some medicine to eat and suppress these chest pains.

I hooked up an outer robe and draped it around my shoulders.

Like a thief[3], I stooped over to put on my boots. With my hand carefully shielding a lantern, I closed the door to my room and started heading outside.

A crescent moon hung high in the sky.

Fang Hua's room was across the courtyard from mine. The cool and quiet brilliance of the moonlight spilled upon the ground.

His door was closed, and his windows were tightly shut.

Still covering the lantern light from view, I peered towards the paper-covered window. At times it looked pitch-black, but sometimes it seemed that light would waver in and out.

Was he asleep?

But it was still so early...

I grabbed one of my hairpins and tried to spy in the crack between the door and doorframe, my body glued against the door plank as I listened for sounds of movement. My hand was using force too, squeezing the long, thin hairpin through the cracks before wiggling it up and down. After a long while, I unlocked the door.

Heheheh, it's true what they say about practice makes perfect. I quietly glided through the door.

Just by using the lantern in my hands, I could see the bedcovers were messily pushed aside. Not far away was a pale yellow light emanating from behind a folding screen.

There was even the sound of pouring water.

It seems like he was taking a bath. I immediately bent down, tiptoeing to the cabinet in front of the bed and sizing up the bottles and flasks there. I narrowed my eyes.

Hn.

I was blank.

Should I get the Ten Perfect Essence Green Tea, or the Nine Condensations of Jade? But the Thousand Creations Sacred Water had

strong recuperative properties as well...just that using it to relieve some swelling seemed like a waste.

My fingers slipped over each bottle as I fumbled along.

I got mixed up with the time.

Suddenly, the sound of pouring water behind the screen stopped, and the reflection upon the water's surface grew extremely clear. The outlines of that person's face also became increasingly distinct as he turned his head to look my way.

Startled, I quickly lowered my head and blew out the light in my hands. But it was already too late...

"Shao'er, is that you?" a voice carried over from behind the screen, the sounds of a spring bath sure and distinct.

Aiyayayaya~

I panicked, picking up my robes with gritted teeth.

Seriously, this was like trying to steal a chicken only to lose the grain used to bait it. To try and gain an advantage, only to end up worse off. I felt like I was choking, but I stubbornly refused to make a noise.

Squatting down, I relaxed my body and decided to start crawling. As long as I made it to the door, then I could sneak away. He wouldn't try to

catch someone without putting on some clothes, right?

As it turned out, I was wrong again.

There was a sound of splashing water. Droplets scattered against the screen, and the painting of mountains and water[4]...was really changed into a literal mountains and water painting. I saw the candle flame wavering behind the screen. His long, graceful figure must have been reflected against the water there, and it must have been extremely beautiful.

By this point, I didn't even have the energy to try crawling anymore.

"Shao'er, you came at the perfect time. Help me bring my clothes over." His hand brushed against the screen almost helplessly, while his body descended back into the tub. With a long and gentle breath, he spoke, "I think I put it in the wardrobe next to the bed."

This guy...

He didn't even bring a change of clothes with him when taking a bath.

If I had come any later, wouldn't I have seen a beautiful naked man walking around the room? ...simply thinking about it was just...

I took a deep breath and put on a long face.

Seriously, what timing. I didn't dare try stealing any more pills, but

obediently found him a robe and carried it with both hands behind the screen.

"Yifu... ..here."

While I was still saying 'here,' he suddenly extended a hand and gripped my wrist, the scattered water soaking my sleeves. I blinked a few times, and before I could react...

...I felt a sudden force dragging me over.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, what's going on now?! Save me...I don't want to spy on an old guy like you bathing!

[1]taels (兩) —liang, also Chinese for the number 2, in this case it's an ancient unit of weight equal to 40grams, or 1.3oz of silver.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tael>

[2]short table (案) —specifically an an, as seen in these images.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=%E6%A1%88&espv=2&biw=1237&bih=682&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiY3YDZnYUwAhUKEwEQAQoKAAQ>

[3]like a thief (賊頭賊腦) —zeitou zeinao means to have a crafty head and wicked brain, an idiom for behaving, well, like a thief.

[4]painting of mountains and water (山水畫) —shanshui hua, a genre of

Chinese painting that focuses on landscapes. Its literal name is “mountain water painting”, probably since both are popular subjects.

Chapter 10: An Amusing Bath Story

I really didn't know how to express the shocking I was feeling.

I only came to deliver some clothes...

It's absolutely true that I had no intentions of peeping.

Still, I was dragged along until I ended up behind the screen. Because the other had used a lot of strength, I didn't even have time to find my bearings before I was leaning over the edge of the wooden tub, a hair's breadth from falling inside.

I wiped my face. Whoa, this bath water was really fragrant. A puff of air rose up to my forehead, turning my neck and the roots of my ears red. Now this was heat.

My hands danced about as I tried to straighten up. But my sleeves were inside the tub, the light material soaking up the water until they were thoroughly wet. Those heavy, waterlogged sleeves carried the sound of gurgling water as I touched something warm within the tub. It was slippery like a loach, but the tactile sensation was very pleasing. Before I could figure out what it was, he caught me until I was facing him head-on. My face looked red and flustered, but I had turned cold all over.

"Shao'er, what are you doing here so late?" his voice was gentle, refined, and pleasant to hear. There was no sign of anger in the tone.

I blinked a few times before looking away, my gaze resting on the hand around my wrist. His five fingers were long and slender, his speech light and soft, but every move he made was filled with strength and it didn't seem like he was going to let me go.

My silence lasted for a while before I managed to give him a smile.

Could I say I came here to steal pills?

Gulp, honesty wasn't the best policy here.

Well, I couldn't exactly say I came to peep on him bathing...

If I said a lie like that, I might as well tell the truth instead. My eyes spun in their sockets as I tried to think of an excuse to get by, but my mind was blank upon gazing at the beautiful scene before me.

All the excellent sights and sounds of spring...in my head there was a sudden bang, as if I had been mindblown. I guess this was what happened when one's blood 'boiled with righteous indignation.' All we were missing was a catcall whistle.

His expression was one of lazy indolence, one hand resting by the side of his head, measuring me up with half-closed eyes. The Adam's apple by his fingers moved slightly. I started. It wasn't very comfortable to be stooping over the tub like this, especially when the wood pressing against my chest made the pains worse.

I vaguely remembered that during my beggar days...boys going through puberty would grow Adam's apples, and they'd give people strange looks...

Wait a minute.

I had a sudden, abrupt shock.

When Fang Hua picked me up from the temple, my body looked around seven or eight years old. Only five years had passed since then...I couldn't be starting puberty this early, right?

"Why aren't you saying anything, hn?"

His single 'hn' hung in the air, soft and unbroken as if overwhelmed with sorrow...

I was starting to suspect that he'd drank some alcohol again.

With my heart set, I gritted my teeth and said shamelessly, "I couldn't fall asleep, so I decided to wander around. When I heard yifu calling for me I conveniently came inside."

"Nonsense. Next time you try stealing something, remember not to bring a candle. Did you think I was blind to a large circle of light like that?"

Like I'd try to steal again.

He smiled a bit as if pleased with my obedient expression, and spoke again. "Come, help me scrub my back."

Tears. You still can't tell the different between girls and boys...

He didn't seem aware of my inner struggle, but turned around with his back to me, his arms resting over the sides of the tub. The cloth that was originally draped over its edge was now floating freely in the water.

At this moment, he wasn't wearing a thing while soaking in the tub. Strands of black hair floated on the water, while gentle ripples beat against his white skin, forming a striking vision... He leaned comfortably against the edge of the tub with his eyes closed.

I sadly shifted my steps to get closer and gave a quick glance, eyes drifting until they came to rest in the water...

Who knew if a Fang Hua Beast had the same anatomy as a human...

Perhaps he'd put medicinal herbs in the water, because the surface was too turbid to see the facts.

"Hurry up..." he urged a little impatiently.

I immediately averted my gaze and sucked in a deep breath, before getting to work.

Scrubscrubscrub... I'll scrub you to death.

He hummed once.

I jerked and then relented, scrubbing him more gently. The sensations felt pretty nice, so I changed up my way of scrubbing.

"Yifu, you have really nice skin." Not like mine, all dark and ugly like a black-boned chicken[1].

"Well, you weren't born with skin like this. I think someone fed you drugs to make you this way." he said offhandedly in a light tone.

Ah...

"Can we fix it?"

"Of course, just soak yourself daily in some herbs and you'll fully recover."

"Seriously?! Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"You never asked. I thought you liked looking the way you are."

Now I wanted to destroy him. He actually looked after me for five years... ...before telling me I'd once been drugged. But I had looked like this ever since my beggar days. Whether I was poisoned then or earlier,

who'd waste their time on a brat like me?

It really was strange.

My thoughts kept spinning while my hands kept scrubbing, mindful of my sleeves draping on the edge of the tub as I cleaned the skin by his collarbones. If I went a little lower...I'd reach his chest...

Here was another weird thing. Over the past few years, the chances of such a thing happening was pitifully low. Typically, I had little to no contact with his body, even less in such an intimate manner. Raising my eyes, I caught him looking down at me, his gaze gentle and mild and his eyes very pretty to see.

My heart skipped a beat, and I started to scrub with all my strength.

"Hnn..." he said once, and didn't say anything else.

I stopped and looked at him. "Yifu, what's wrong?" As soon as I spoke, I regret it.

The water splashed as he reached out a hand, gently brushing aside the outermost layer of my robes to open it up. Shocked, I immediately covered my chest with my hands.

He paused for a moment, gazing at my hands, before asking me in a concerned tone, "Shao'er, has your body been feeling unwell recently?"

Well...

His eyes were extremely sharp. But it's not like I could say my...chest... was swollen, right? I knitted my eyebrows, before replying stiffly. "Not at all, you're being paranoid."

"Let me see your hand so I can take your pulse." Though he was soaking in the water before, now he suddenly stood up, splattering water everywhere. I was as frightened as a bird.

"Yifu, what are you doing?!" I turned my head away, refusing to look at him. But then I thought it'd be a shame if I missed this chance, so I changed my mind and looked back—only to see that he'd already changed into his clothes.

...I'm crying.

"I'm just changing into my clothes, you don't have to hide." He lowered his head to tighten his sash, speaking in an easy tone. "In this house, we're father and son, so there's no need to act like an outsider."

Yifu, you're just too naïve.

In the future, if you ever figure out that the world has both men and women, or that the foster son you raised for five years was a foster daughter, you would never let me watch you change your clothes.

I'm going to cry again...

I gave off an air of sullen depression.

He'd already taken my hand in my moment of stupefaction to check my pulse. After some serious thought, he mused, "There's nothing obstructing your internal channels." Afterwards, he went back to staring at my chest.

The atmosphere was extremely awkward as the candle flames flickered around us. I think my face must have been as red as shrimp roe by now.

He studied me for a while with eyebrows raised before exhaling and grasping my hand, speaking in a heavy, focused tone. "Shao'er, even though I'm not a very rich, I've never held back a thing when I fed you. I've never stolen anything from you either, so..."

He hesitated, shooting a look my way, as if it was difficult to continue. I pricked my ears to listen, and in the end, he spoke anyways.

"So, it's not worth it to hide rancid mantou in your chest. If you keep it there for too long, they'll spoil."

Rage!

I was filled with sudden anger.

He tugged me again, with more strength this time, until I toppled into his embrace.

Ow...

My face grimaced in pain.

He was startled but didn't hesitate, using the moment to undo all my robes...

A lamp light on the side flickered back and forth.

That expression was gentle and soft as he spoke. "So this was the reason."

My whole body had gone stiff as I stood there, unmoving. The only thing that stirred were my clothes. The fragrant scent emanating from Fang Hua floated out again to surround me, making me almost dizzy.

He spoke lightly again. "Looks like it's swollen. But it won't be a problem. In a bit, I'll use some acupuncture needles to prick it and you'll be all right."

Ahhh

AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

I'M FURIOUS!!

Ignoring everything else, he carefully replaced my clothes and helped me tie the sash around my waist. My anger rose from my heart and I shoved him aside with one push. He smiled softly at me, lifting a hand behind my forehead to draw me closer to him again.

“Shao’er, it’s almost your fifteenth birthday. What kind of present do you want?”

Ah...

I didn’t even know what day my birthday was, so how did know?

And, when did I turn fifteen years old?

He smiled in a flash of time that became eternity, and said, “I will give you...the very best.”

[1]black-boned chicken (乌鸡) —wu ji, literally “crow chicken”, a species of chicken with black skin, also known as the Silkie fowl. In my experience, their meat tastes a little ‘smokier’ than ye old regular white-breast chicken.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=gallus+domesticus+brisson&espv=2&biw=1237&bih=682&source=ln>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silkie>

Chapter 11: Gift of a Hairpin

Recently, Fang Hua's movements had gotten more eccentric.

His expression looked very suspicious too...

Typically, he'd stay in the house fiddling with medicinal plants, or adjusting some things with his weird and fantastic pills. He'd only take a trip every half month to visit the markets to buy some rice. Sometimes he'd bring back a pair of ducks or chickens and let them loose in the courtyard until life ran its course, feeding them grains on occasion.

I was grateful for such actions...

After all, he still remembered that these animals had different tastes than himself.

Sometimes I wondered what would happen if he never took me in. Maybe he'd never leave his house and just guard the plants and flowers for the rest of his life. He'd never talk with ordinary people, much less go bargain-shopping for groceries.

I remember when I first arrived, he rarely talked. For half a year, the words I spoke with him didn't add up past ten sentences. It was as if ignoring people was routine for him, as if he was a noble figure who live outside the realm of mortals.

This piece of land rarely saw humans. We had no neighbors for hundreds of li[1] in four directions. The house was surrounded by a bamboo forest: clean and quiet, elegant and calm, a good place to live in seclusion.

In the past, I used to think our meeting at the run-down temple was a simple coincidence. When the Fang Hua of that time met the pitiful me, with no one else to depend on, he must have been looking to adopt a child and nothing more.

But I don't think that's the case anymore.

Fang Hua naturally preferred quiet, and didn't seek fame or fortune. He always descended the mountain with a fixed goal in mind. That time when we met—was it serendipity, or intentional?

I couldn't tell anymore. After that serious illness in my youth, I didn't even know who I was anymore. How would he know my birthday, or my age? It was really weird.

I've thought too much...now everything's tangled up...

My brain seized up and my eyelids felt heavy. My entire person wanted to sleep. Sprawled on the stone table, I yawned as I stared at the tightly shut door, spacing out. Fang Hua kept going out these past days, so it was rare to see him. Sheesh, he's such a hard guy to understand...

Suddenly, there was a noise from the door. I gave a start and woke up half-way, getting to my feet.

A figure appeared outside the gate, his shallow red robes covered with dust. But it was still hard to take one's eyes away from the sight. His expression looked somewhat tired and sleepy as he stared blankly in my direction. "Shao'er, what are you doing still standing there? Shouldn't you be soaking in your herbal bath?"

I wanted to ask where he went, but the words didn't come. I only said in a low voice, "I've already heated up the water, but I forgot which medicinal plants I should add in again..."

He smiled. "It is a little complicated, though I've told you plenty of times already. Look at what kind of memory you have."

Actually, my memory was very good...

By listening and watching, I'd grasped the general properties and types of all sorts of medicines. But since I knew them so well...I also understood which combinations of plants had no effects on me.

Lowering my head, I followed along behind him. I listlessly brought over some hot water and poured it into the tub. I watched him lift up his sleeves and pluck a few herbs, considering them inch by inch as he added them into the water.

I bit my lip...

They were all ingredients to help a person relax and adjust their breathing, and had no use whatsoever for eliminating poisons. There

were a few plants that were unfamiliar, but I secretly tasted some a while back and found them raw and astringent. They turned my tongue numb and made my insides churn.

I didn't know what those two leaves were called either, only that they were very difficult to find in this world.

But...after spending so long soaking in this mix of plants, my skin was as dark as ever, so I began to lose interest. I stole a glance at Fang Hua, who was diligently moving his sleeves aside to reach into the water and test the temperature.

"Your body is weaker than a typical boy's so I can't use stronger medicine on you. This poison has stayed in the body for so many years that it's not something we can get rid of quickly. Making your own body harmonious is the first step. If you don't have any internal energy then it's impossible. During these days, you should soak in these herbs more often until you acquire Qi[2] and your posture improves. Then I'll use a different method to expel the poison."

Wait a minute...

What did he just say?

This tub of water is for me to increase my internal energy?

"Soaking one day in here is equal to cultivating five years. It's something that plenty of martial artists can't even dream of accomplishing." And he said this all in such a casual tone.

I'm going to go nuts...

Why didn't you say so earlier! I thought it was weird! These days, I'd feel some sort of Qi surging around inside me whenever I closed my eyes... looks like it was internal energy.

Growing...

I immediately bent down to undo my sash and robes before I halted, suddenly aware of a certain detail. I looked over with a dumbfounded stare. "Yifu, why aren't you leaving yet?"

"I'll help you wash your back."

It's fine, I don't need that!

Two hours later, I walked out with my head bathed in steam. Fang Hua was drinking tea at the stone table, smiling as he waved towards me. I lightly stepped over, furiously shaking my hair. He shook as I splashed him all over with water.

"How unruly. Did you take a bath or just wash your hair? You didn't even dry it first, be careful you don't catch a chill."

I was ridiculously happy.

Just thinking that I'd gained five years' worth of internal energy made

my face split open in a grin. He couldn't help but sigh before standing up, taking a cloth out from who-knows-where to cover up my head. Those warm and gentle fingers slowly rubbed it dry.

Nice...

It's really comfortable.

"Yifu, you said Shao'er would get a gift at fifteen years." I leaned back and fell into his torso, rubbing the damp hair against his robes. Clutching his sleeves, I brazenly asked, "Where's Shao'er's present?"

He couldn't help but smile as he dug inside his sleeves, pulling out an object that he placed in my palms.

A haipin?

It was neither made of wood nor jade, but something blood-red in hue, finely polished to a simple yet elegant shape. A nostalgic scent wafted from my fingers as I caressed it gently, but I couldn't recall what it was.

"Do you like it?"

"Un." The pattern was simple and unsophisticated, as if it had been handmade.

"You've almost come of age, so you shouldn't wear your hair loose all the time. Tie your hair up nowadays, you'll look more energetic."

“What kind of wood is this made from?”

Mahogany?

It didn't seem like it...

Bamboo?

Do you think I'm stupid, that's even more impossible.

It's weird, this feel really familiar. I've definitely smelled this scent somewhere else.

“...this...I'll tell you in the future, don't just sniff it blindly.”

He reached out from behind me to take my hair, wiping his hands on my robes before coiling it two or three times. Then he took the hairpin from me, hesitated a moment, and said, “Shao'er stayed with yifu for so many years. You must be lonely.”

I was suddenly seized with panic before I could react. My scalp hurt, and when I touched my head...

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

My hair didn't even get to dry before he tied it up. The air was so

humid. If you tied up half-wet hair like this, you'd grow lice!

Aye!

Fang Hua had never called himself yifu in front of me. That was the first time, which was why I was so surprised and forgot to reply him. Before I turned fifteen years old, I thought I would live with yifu for the rest of my life. But I was wrong.

It was when he appeared.

The second day after Fang Hua gave me the hairpin, he calmly followed Fang Hua back. He was tall and slender and straight as a ramrod, dressed in a robe adorned with plum blossom branches that made him seem seven parts elegant and three parts heroic. He looked a bit older than me, and his every moment was graceful and noble. From a long way off, he spotted me with a clear smile.

He said, Shao Hua, I know you.

He said, Shao Hua, I'll be living here now with you and Fang Hua.

Nobody had ever called me by my full name before. Yet I remained staring fixedly at one point. His slender white hand held Fang Hua's, the ten fingers closed together, but Fang Hua just smiled and said nothing.

The rain fell as a fine drizzle, the mist covered waters surrounded us for tens of thousands of li, the sun began to set.

A single strand of the willow tree, a single measure of feelings.

[1]li (里) —a traditional Chinese unit of distance approximately half a mile, or 500 meters long. [2]qi (气) —air, chi, energy that circulates within the body, *etc.* Chinese medicine believes in treating qi to gain a healthy body.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_\(unit\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_(unit))

Chapter 12: Young Han Zichuan

Fine raindrops fell between wisps of wind. Within the mist, an indistinct figure could be seen between the willow branches. This person had a tall and slender stature, and stood there with an umbrella[1], giving off an indescribable feeling of peace. His looks were tasteful and refined, even handsome.

He, was the so-called Han Zichuan[2].

"The rain's getting stronger, hurry up and come inside." I languidly leaned out the door to yell at him.

"Fang Hua isn't back yet, I'll wait a bit longer."

Tch...

Whether or not you enjoy waiting, it serves you right if you get wet.

I gave a snort and closed the door behind me, completely shutting him out from view. He didn't seem much older than me, and was probably 17 or 18 years old. But I had no good feelings towards him.

Since the first day Fang Hua brought him to our house, my heart had felt empty...every time we ate, there'd be an extra pair of chopsticks. He'd also take away pieces of my favorite twice-cooked pork[3].

Fang Hua would never cook only for me again, or only buy clothes for me again...another person had gotten between us.

That person was Han Zichuan.

Han Zichuan would call him Fang Hua...

But I could only call him yifu...

I was in low spirits, but I didn't know why...

I grabbed a cup off the table and poured myself some water, which I drained in one gulp.

I can't be so negative.

There were still important things to do today before Fang Hua came home. With my focus set, I tugged open the front door—and was greeted with a face full of rainwater. Narrowing my eyes, I touched my face and sucked in a deep breath. Just great.

Han Zichuan was noticeably startled as he drew back the hand that shook out his umbrella. Quickly, he pulled up his sleeves to wipe my face, saying, "Younger Brother Shao, I'm really sorry. I didn't do it on purpose."

What a nice guy.

The differences between us was even more obvious. I shoved him aside.

"Screw off, leave me alone."

He smiled, not the least irritated as he tugged my sleeve. "It's raining now, so you should bring an umbrella if you're going out."

As if I was your wife or such nonsense...bring what umbrella? I gave him a scornful look and waved him off, saying boldly, "I don't need one."

With a swish of my robes, I valiantly walked off. Tch, this rain wasn't even that heavy, it didn't even land on my robes...eeee? Something didn't seem right. I turned around and spotted Han Zichuan raising an umbrella over my head, following in my footsteps with a warm smile.

I sucked in a breath.

Forget it. Some people just had stubborn personalities that refused to change. I could only let him do as he wanted and hold the umbrella, but kept sullen for the entire trip.

After crossing through part of the bamboo forest, the skies cleared up. The weather in the mountains were fickle at times like these, always changing unpredictably. Han Zichuan closed his umbrella and stood there quietly. I glanced at him and saw that a large section behind his shoulders was soaked from the water.

A part of my heart softened. All things considered, this person had a pretty good moral character.

"The scenery here is really mesmerizing. Did Brother Shao come to collect ingredients for medicines?" Han Zichuan surveyed the area around him, finally smelling the faint scent of medicinal plants in the air.

"No," I replied tersely.

I sealed my thoughts and pushed aside the bamboo leaves, stepping past some twigs until I was standing atop the edge of the cliff and looking down.

The entire mountain was covered in plants and flowers...

It was as splendid a sight as I remembered.

I hadn't come here for a long time. What used to be a cliff for the younger me could only be considered a slope now. Over the past few months, Fang Hua not only told me to soak in medicinal baths to increase my internal energy[4], but taught me some breathing techniques as well.

But he didn't teach me many martial arts moves. Even though this was a tall slope, I didn't really have much grasp of how to get down safely. Still, I couldn't resist sneaking a glance again. Kicking a pebble downhill, I watch as it tumbled down in a stream of dust...and my heart beat wildly. Actually, this was still pretty high.

"When the internal energy reaches the top of the head, bring the full weight of you body to your upper half. This way your feet will be able to travel over surfaces with the slightest pressure." A voice slowly floated

towards me.

Oh...

Was it like that?

"The movements must be swift, so the momentum can remain unbroken. If you're slow by even a bit and can't attract the qi, your qi will naturally sink down and the weight of your body will return to as before."

Surprised, I didn't think much before doing exactly as told. One foot stepped onto the precipice, body twisting to borrow some energy as I opened up my sleeves and started lightly floating down.

The scenery shifted as I moved along, making me dizzy. My feet lost their grip and I stepped onto the spongy soil.

Curses...

But I hadn't injured myself. Raising my head, I saw the person who'd tipped me off give me a helpless expression as he paced back and forth by the edge.

"Thanks," I waved at him.

He grew even more anxious and dragged out a length of rattan vine, as if he was going to climb down after me.

A nice guy...

He was great at memorizing things, but it was all useless since he didn't know any martial arts skills. I stuffed my robes around my waist and started drifting up like a stray leaf. At the very top of the precipice, I grabbed him by the collar and with light steps, forcefully took him along as I floated back down.

Darn it, he's really heavy.

The two of us crashed heavily to the ground, and he helplessly tumbled to the bottom. In contrast, I dusted myself off and leisurely got to my feet, looking around until I saw that patch of yellow earth again. My expression grew heavy as I made my way over.

Han Zichuan followed, tripping and stumbling along.

This was the place...

There was no mistake.

I squatted down and felt about the soil for a long while...

Huh? How could it wasn't there anymore?

"Shao'er, what are you looking for...? Ah..." The person[5] walking leisurely towards the tomb in the patch of yellow earth suddenly turned pale and backed up a few paces, using his body to block my field of

vision.

Meanwhile, my hand...

Just happened to brush against something buried in the dirt.

-O-

[1]umbrella (伞) —san. Ancient Chinese umbrellas were typically made from wood and oil-paper. Sometimes they were decorated with paintings and other designs, as seen here. They're typically stiffer and straighter than modern-day umbrellas. You can read more about them on Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oil-paper_umbrella

<https://www.google.com/search?q=chinese+umbrella&espv=2&biw=1237&bih=682&site=webhp&source>

[2]Han Zichuan (韩子川) —our third character makes his debut! Han is just a surname. Zi could mean "son" or "child", and Chuan is "river" or "plain." So his full name could be read as the "Han son of the river/plains", I think.

[3]twice-cooked pork (回锅肉) —hui guo rou, or "double-cooked pork", a Sichuan styled Chinese dish mixing simmered + stir-fried pork with vegetables. Often served with chili seasoning.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twice_cooked_pork

[4]internal energy (内功) — forgot to mention this in the previous chapter, but this is the same neigong Fang Hua used to pick Shao'er up and inspect her in chapter 4. I figured an English standin for the pinyin

wouldn't hurt the meaning.:)

[5]the person —the original text isn't very clear, but it's still Han Zichuan speaking here. The "er" in Shao'er is a diminutive added to a name (like -chan, -kun, -san in Japanese), indicating these two are pretty familiar with each other.

Chapter 13: The Mysterious Corpse

My damp fingers were covered in dirty yellow soil...

Within the messily excavated mud was a small wooden plaything...

It was a uncommon [drum-shaped rattle](#) [1] with four drums layered atop each other. When one rotated the drum handle, their sounds would alternate between high and low notes, producing a resonant, pleasing tone for the ears.

I didn't know why, but tears started streaming down my face. My head bowed, and I hurriedly dug the object out. In my memory, there was another object as well. As it turned out, there was a diabolo buried nearby. I picked it up between my fingers, only to find that it was already broken.

I remembered it was called a diabolo, but its other name was a dou weng[3]. Originally, one would use a length of twine held between two bamboo rods to move along its wooden axle, where rotating it at high speeds would start create a humming noise.

These were all children's toys.

When I was a beggar, I didn't even have enough food to eat, much less chances to play with these things... I cradled them in my hands and gently touched the pieces. Why did they feel so familiar?

These tactile impressions, along with the patterns in the wood, all seemed to be carved deeply in my memory as if I'd forgotten something along the way. Something very important to me.

But what was it...?

I mused for a while before lifting my head. It was then I saw Han Zichuan looking off at one point, his face completely white. It seemed like something had scared him out of his wits.

I hurriedly reburied the little toys and stood up, walking to his side. My sleeves billowed out as I prepared to push him aside. "What's up with you? Why did you yell earlier?"

He was seized with terror as he looked at me, before forcefully grabbing me with enough strength to dig into my skin. I was mystified, and my eyes involuntarily drifted to somewhere behind his shoulders...

In a panic, he used his other hand to block my eyes.

"Brother Shao, don't look."

Tch, what was it I couldn't look at...not a dead person, right? I roughly pushed him aside, and as it turned out...I guessed right. Not just dead, but a skeleton. It leaned against the tomb of yellow earth, as if nestling up to its side. The material of its clothes were very high-quality, so much that a portion of it still looked undisturbed by natural decay. I was astonished.

The two of us stood blankly for a while.

"How long do you think it's been here?" Han Zichuan asked softly.

"I don't know," I shook my head.

Maybe it'd existed since forever.

My younger self who had followed Fang Hua didn't have the skills to descend into the valley, so I never got to see this...

"Looks like someone frequently comes around to tidy up this grave," Han Zichuan spoke, glancing around with his ashen face. His eyes eventually returned to rest on the skeleton, and he was quiet for a long while before he spoke again. "It seems like this dead person really loved this grave, so why didn't the tidy-up person up bury them together?"

This would have to be a question for Fang Hua. I really wanted to know the answer too...

I muttered to myself for a while, gradually circling half a circle around the corpse. The more I looked, the more suspicious I felt. With a deep breath, I knelt down and reached over with my hand—before someone clapped my shoulder.

"Hey...Brother Shao, what are you doing? It's really disrespectful to disturb someone's eternal rest."

"What are you blabbing about? Come and help me!" I raised my voice, but the noise just made him roll his eyes.

This guy...

What did he know?

For a questionable person to die in the wilderness, there was a chance it had some rare martial arts manuals or secret papers hidden on its person. No doubt, just by looking at its posture...

Although it was half embracing the grave mound, one of its hands was hidden beneath its body as if trying to extricate something out from its robes. Energized, I pulled up my sleeves and reached inside its clothing.

Han Zichuan trembled as he wobbled over, grabbing me beneath the armpits as he prepared to drag me away. "Please don't be offended, Brother Ghost, please don't be offended...Brother Shao is still young, he hasn't learned how to act sensibly yet."

As it turned out, retribution arrived.

In the middle of desperate struggling with each other, our combined forces sent me falling backwards. My hand groped uselessly at the air before pulling out a length of cloth from the corpse's robes...

Han Zichuan and I were both shocked.

A poor quality piece of cloth that looked like it was made from burlap and felt like sheepskin to the touch...

Although much time had passed, it still radiated a strong stench, and upon looking at it closely, I noticed it had a giant bloodstain. There were also rows and rows of written words that had an energetic personality, the strokes bold and strong. Even against the dark backdrop, it was possible to see their approximate outlines.

I was suddenly attacked by an indescribable feeling of sadness. My hand started trembling as if it'd lost the strength to hold on, and the words on the cloth started shaking even harder in response.

'When those days ended, I felt disconsolate and empty over the fact that we couldn't meet. The happy times of then are now as distant as the divide between Heaven and Man. Early on, a thousand li already existed to keep us separate. I was the one who didn't treat you well enough back then. Now I'll use my own life to make it up to you. I just hope that after you return from the grave, you can look after that child[4]. This way, even if I die...I will be content.'

My eyes stared transfixed on a single point. The message had no sender or recipient, but was tagged with five characters: Final Words[5] Gifted to Fang Hua.

I took a deep breath.

Stay calm... I told myself before looking again. The words were still there as before, puzzling me for a long while. Then I quickly hide them in

my robes, my hands quivering the entire time. My heart was pounding furiously from the shock, as if it wanted to jump out of my throat.

"Brother Shao, what's wrong?" Han Zichuan placed a hand on my shoulder, his face looking at me in deep concern.

But I was silent.

With extreme reluctance, I managed a smile.

"What kind of expression is that? It's even more ghastly than a crying one. What was written on that cloth...let me see." He reached out a hand, the other wrapping around my waist to support me.

I shook my head, but my feet lost their strength and I sank to the ground. Then I simply hugged my legs and closed my eyes. Still, it couldn't stop the stream of memories from flowing like water, or my body from shuddering uncontrollably.

I remember that night when Fang Hua told me, "Someone I used to know very well once fell in love with a person unable to return his feelings."

"The person he loved already had a wife, but he was still drawn to that person like a moth to a flame. The second half of his life was spent in grief so heavy that he wished he were dead. His eventual death was miserable, and he was buried far from humans, surrounded by nothing but flowers as he sank into an eternal sleep."

Under the moonlight, he had smiled a smile cold enough to chill the liver.

"I just don't understand... ..the mortals all say that the Fang Hua Beast is an animal capable of feelings, but they can never obtain their heart's desire."

I thought I'd forgotten these words, but now they appeared in my mind clearer than ever. At that time I thought, that was only someone he used to know well, but why does he look so grieved?

As it turned out, I was wrong.

'That' person's story might have been Fang Hua's own.

The bones nestled next to the tomb must have been that ungrateful, heartless person.

Maybe not all of the Fang Hua Beasts in this world were named 'Fang Hua', but I knew...my yifu's name was Fang Zi Hua[6]. The corpse before me now was someone who died for him.

The cloth was something it'd left behind for him.

I just didn't understand why this person wrote, 'after you return from the grave, you can look after that child...'

Just who used to be buried in this tomb...?

And another thing.

I anxiously walked around again, squatting down before furiously starting to dig. I didn't even bother dusting off the dirt staining my robes, or the tiny bits of sandy soil stuck between my fingernails, even though it was quite painful.

"Have you gone crazy?!" Someone grabbed my hands, then lifted my head. I saw Han Zichuan's knitted eyebrows, and felt a little sad.

"What are you doing?!"

"Don't get in my way..."

Something had been trying to emerge from the depths of my mind. But after he interrupted, it was shaken, and turned back into a blank space. I only stared dumbly at the toys in the dirt as if dazed.

Why was it that little piece of red wood was already long gone?

"Brother Shao, I know it's not good for me to say such things now," Han Zichuan carefully took a breath, holding his robes as he knelt by my side. "If we disturb someone's rest like this, we'll gain retribution."

I looked at him as if he was an idiot. He squeezed my hand before letting it go, a warm smile in his eyes. After carefully observing me, he added on another line. "Fang Hua's almost home. We should leave."

His determined tone dragged me back to reality.

If Fang Hua knew I came here...he'd definitely punish me. In a flash, I'd gotten to my feet, my body unsteady. Han Zichuan scooped me over with a smile, and patted me lightly on the back. "Brother Shao, your body's really skinny, I can hold onto you with just one arm."

I stood stunned, unable to react. His hand felt the side of my body again. With a surprised noise, he leaned over to sniff the space around my head before smilingly pointing with a finger. "Your scent has the same fragrant aroma as the grave mound."

What a 'nice guy'...

You rogue, it's you who smells like a grave mound! I rolled my eyes and looked over, pointing behind his back. He cluelessly followed my gaze and I took the chance to kick him with all my strength, the action quick and clean. Then I shook out my sleeves and started walking away.

He followed behind me with a bitter expression on his face, tripping and stumbling along, his limp more pronounced than before.

When we got home, it was already dark.

Fang Hua sat in the courtyard, sipping from a cup of tea. Occasionally he'd raise his head to glance at us, but he didn't say a word. I felt both awkward and uncomfortable.

I grabbed a pair of chopsticks and sat at the table, ducking my head as I filled my bowl without a peep. Han Zichuan hobbled halfway around the table, unsure of where to sit.

“Zichuan, what happened to your leg?” Fang Hua lowered his head, shifting the lid of his teacup as he sipped. “Where did you two go?”

The air suddenly turned cold.

[1]drum-shaped rattle (拨浪鼓) —bo lang gu, or “wave-shaking drum”, a small toy for kids. You place the handle between your palms and rub them against each other to rotate the drum, causing the ends of the ‘drumsticks’ to hit its surface. Can get pretty loud and annoying if you give it to toddlers. ; A ; Check out the den-den daiko in the link [here](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pellet_drum) too, it’s basically the same thing.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pellet_drum

[2]diabolo (空竹) —kong zhu, more commonly known as a Chinese yo-yo.

[3]dou weng (抖嗡) —or “trembling drone/buzz/hum”, another name for the Chinese yo-yo based on the noise it makes when it’s in motion.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_yo-yo

[4]that child (吾孩儿) —wu hai er, in which 孩儿 is child, and 吾 is a really...tricky pronoun. It could mean both I/me or we/us. Without proper context, I can’t tell if the letter from the corpse is saying “take care of my child” or “take care of our child”. Neither can Shao’er I bet, so I made a

compromise with the translation.

[5]Final Words (绝笔) —jue bi, not just any ‘final words,’ but specifically “last words written before one’s death,” also known as the “last work of an author or painter.” [6]Fang Zi Hua (芳字华) —looks like we got yifu’s full name, and Fang Hua was his preferred name/nickname/etc. Zi means “word, character”. Zi Hua together could mean “splendid words/characters.”

Chapter 14: A Mask of Human Skin?

"Zichuan, what happened to your leg?" Fang Hua lowered his head, shifting the lid of his teacup as he sipped. "Where did you two go?"

The air suddenly turned cold.

Things abruptly became extremely quiet as I felt a piercing gaze boring into my back. It felt like I was suddenly sitting on pins and needles. I lowered my head even further, furiously filling up my bowl.

"Shao'er went with me on a stroll," Han Zichuan smiled, taking out his own chopsticks. "He saw that I was still a stranger to the place, so the offer was made with good intentions. Unfortunately, it was raining outside, so I fell on the slippery grounds." After speaking, he even cast a glance my way. "None of this is Brother Shao's fault."

I felt rather disagreeable as my gaze drifted to the skies. Wasn't this a case of burying the silver, then sticking up a sign that said 'no silver buried here'[1]? Silence reigned as I continued to fill up my bowl.

Yifu smiled, and I felt his comfortable, at-ease gaze gradually return to look at me again. He only said softly, "Is that so..."

This neutral tone of speaking would usually be no cause for alarm. But since he used it here, it felt as if he had some misgivings about our answers. At least, it sure kept a person guessing.

I closed my eyes and pretended to be deaf. My left hand grabbed one mantou while my right hand grabbed another, both of which I crammed into my mouth.

I wholly absorbed myself in stuffing my face, but my heart was trembling inside.

This Han Zichuan.

His nerves weren't half-bad, making up lies like that.

"Shao'er..." a soft voice drifted over.

I shook and raised my head to look at Fang Hua.

"Don't just eat mantou when there's so many dishes today. You should leave some for Zichuan, too." Fang Hua was leaning against his chair, head propped on one hand, his eyes cold as he gazed at me.

I remained sullen.

"It's fine, I'll eat these slices of beef," Han Zichuan rolled up his sleeves, speaking as he readied his chopsticks. Before he could pick up a piece, I gave him a ferocious glare. He understood immediately. The chopsticks in his hands jerked aside and got some pieces of pickled cucumber instead. Then he stopped speaking altogether.

Hmph. Don't think you can start flaunting around just because yifu

treats you well.

Actually, yifu was probably only worried I'd eat nothing but mantou. Hn, as if I'd let you eat all the meat by yourself, outsider...that had to be the situation. I look up at Fang Hua, then spared a glance at That Guy...

My heart felt extremely irritated just staring at the way That Guy used his chopsticks. I raised my foot and secretly gave him another kick.

"Owww..." That Guy groaned.

"What's wrong? Does your foot hurt again? Come..." Yifu stood up, waving towards him. "Let me take a look for you."

I was surprised. Han Zichuan left his chopsticks and reassured me with a grin before hobbling over.

Yifu personally helped him lie down before undoing his clothing to check the location of the injury. Han Zichuan knitted his eyebrows before turning around to look at me with a bright smile.

"Does it hurt..."

"It doesn't."

"It should be fine. The kick was well-aimed and didn't hurt your bones. All you have to do is apply some medicinal salve. Are you sure it doesn't hurt?"

"It hurts."

I threw my chopsticks on the table with a pa! sound. It was impossible to eat dinner now...

Before I'd taken more than a few steps, yifu's voice spoke up: gentle, calm and clear. "Shao'er, you seem to be suffering from inflammation today, and your temper's extremely bad. Is it because..." His tone was filled with hesitation.

I suddenly had an urge to run away.

As it turned out, he said the following. "You and I are family, but you always act like an outsider...come, I'll treat both of you. I brought my acupuncture needles today so I can prick you a few times. For you to get swollen every few days isn't good."

In a flash, I grew unsteady.

Han Zichuan was still lying on the bench as he looked my way, concerned and yet confused. "Swollen? Where is the swelling?"

"Of course it's where he's covering it up with his hands," Fang Hua replied.

Han Zichuan half raised himself up and stared in the direction of my chest, a complicated expression in his eyes.

Ahhh

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

These two jerks.

I'm not dealing with this anymore.

"Where are you going...?" Fang Hua finally abandoned his smooth tone and that well-behaved expression.

"I'm going to soak in a medicinal bath," I half-turned but didn't move, wavering between staying and leaving.

"You don't need to today," he looked at me and with a toss of his hand, caused the flaps of his sleeves to open. Something flew out from its depths towards me. Surprised, I reached out and caught it in my hands.

It was a white porcelain vase as big as my palm, stoppered with a brilliant red cloth. It looked extremely cute and felt cool to the touch.

"This is the antidote I just made today. Mix it with the water behind the house and spread it over your body." He stood there smiling at me, a warm look in his eyes.

"Many thanks to yifu."

Han Zichuan looked at us, a confused expression on his face. But I didn't feel like paying him any attention, especially when I felt so excited.

Heaven and God on Earth...

I finally received the antidote.

The next moment I was nearly tripping over myself to get to the back of the house. The willow catkins swayed in the wind. I took a few steps into the woods and came upon the jade-colored pond, its waters lit up dazzlingly by the sunlight that streamed down from between the trees.

I looked around me, and let out a whistle.

Taking off my outer robes, I left them on the rocks and leaped into the water, where I slowly sank down as I swam towards the center...

Summer had finally arrived, but I still couldn't help but tremble at the cold. The water here was completely frigid year-round, but it never froze. Its jade-green hues gave off a carefree, happy feeling. Fang Hua once said that the waters here were extremely helpful for refining medicines.

Right...the medicine.

I held the bottle between my fingers as I pulled out the stopper. Then I poured some into my palm and slathered it over an arm.

It was weird, but the oily liquid in my palm suddenly started to burn my

arm with a scorching heart...then it turned numb, and the dark black layers of my skin seemed to become a little red. I started to worry and immediately soaked my arm underwater, where it felt a little better.

I glanced suspiciously at the medicine, afraid to use any more.

Wasn't this just made today?

I'm not being used to test it out, right?

I swam back to shore, deciding it'd be best to ask Fang Hua for an explanation. But just as I was setting the bottle aside, my foot carelessly stepped onto a fragment of rock. The hand holding the medicine was still covered in medicinal oil and very slippery. In a flash, the bottle slipped out of my grasp, flipped in the air a few times, and splashed me in the face with its contents...

Curses...

A numbing, raging fire...

I shut my eyes and plunged into the water.

With pain like this, it felt like my face was burning off. Eyes half-open, I groped around until I found my clothes by the shore again, and used them to wipe myself. When I finally opened my eyes, I seized up at the sight of a pair of boots...

There was also the soft, draping folds of a robe adorned with plum blossom branches, giving its squatting owner a unique style.

“Shao’er, your face...” Han Zichuan had an uncertain expression as he poked me, before scooting closer for a better look. He rubbed at the skin gently, but the cooling sensation of his finger caused me to give a contented sigh.

In response, his face turned red.

I looked at him, not understanding. He looked even more confused than I felt.

What?

He kept rubbing gently at my skin until his finger dug at something. I felt a cold sensation on my face, as if something was being torn off...

[1]no silver buried here (此地无银三百两) —cidi wuyin sanbailiang, or “no 300 taels of silver buried here”, meaning a clumsy denial resulting in self exposure, a weak excuse that gives everything away. Based on a folk tale of a man who tried to hide his money in just a way.

Chapter 15: Meeting at the Jade Pool

He looked as if he was very surprised.

I felt even more astonished.

I narrowed my eyes and looked at the thing between his fingers. It was rather black, and looked like a piece of skin.

He was completely stupefied.

Pushing aside his robes, he knelt down on one knee, the simple action filled with aristocratic grace. He stared at me, then back at his hand, rubbing the thing between his fingers. "What do you usually put on your face..."

The thick, sticky black thing between his fingers slowly fell to land in the water, where it dissolved away. With an unexpected jerk, I touched my face, feeling out a section of skin as smooth as tofu, surrounded by a layer of wrinkly stuff. It felt like if I tugged...then it might...

My eyes widened, and I tore off another piece of skin.

Che, I wasn't that wrinkly, so why was I shedding?

I lowered my head and rubbed at my face... A handful of black stuff appeared...like pieces of skin were falling off. I cupped a palmful of water and started to furiously wash my face.

A sweet fragrance wafted out, and the sound of rustling clothes and a soft breeze reached my ears.

"Brother Shao." Han Zichuan's voice was as soft as spring wind or a fine drizzle, his tone carrying traces of light laughter and a little pity. "How could you be so crude..."

In the next moment, his hands had brushed aside mine, and he started to expertly rub at my face. My eyelashes were soaked with water, so even though I squinted, everything before my still looked blurry.

A gust of wind stirred the tens of thousands of willow catkin heads around us.

He knelt by the shore, back straight as he looked at me with a scholarly air. The wind stirred his sleeves, water soaking the edges of his robes, but he didn't mind, only wearing a pleasant smile on his face. A finger pointed at my face as if he enjoyed himself too much to look away.

His eyes made me feel a little worried.

"Han Zichuan, you stop that..." I backed away. "I can do this myself."

He leaned forward and took my hands, gently setting them on his chest. I shook away his hands as if I'd been burned by boiling water, but his grip only tightened, and the heartbeat I felt beneath his robes was pounding wildly.

I was stupefied. He raised his eyebrows with a smile, and the haziness in his eyes disappeared. The astonishment of his face also changed to an expression of amazed excitement, and the hand stroking my face began to tremble, his voice rising to match. "Brother Shao. Unexpectedly, your looks are matchlessly beautiful."

His sincere gaze came from the bottom of his heart.

It was a clean, pure look, as if he was complimenting me for compliments' sake, with no ill intentions at all.

"Why did you want to hide a face like this..." He looked as if he didn't understand, but his eyes didn't move from me a bit.

Fellow brother, it wasn't my choice to cover it up.

I've looked like this since I was young...

He smiled softly, finally shifting his gaze from my face to my shoulders, then my collarbone...and rubbed it gently.

Surprised, I started to swim backwards, but his hand pressed firmly on my shoulders, unmoving. I could only stutter out, "Y...y-you, what are you doing..."

"Don't move, I'll help you clean it up." His smile was gentle and soft.

There was no hesitation in his hands at all. His movements were clean

and dexterous, as if he were skinning a chicken, neat and quick.

It made me feel...like I was shaking all over, and I nearly drowned. What he said was true. After being tossed around a few times beneath his care, my skin began to glow with a new life. The skin on my arm was as white and clear as a woman's, the complete opposite of what I started with, as if I had changed into a whole new person.

"It's just a pity..." his face was full of regrets, though his hands kept scrubbing nimbly as if they were a part of my skin.

Old fellow, if you keep taking advantage of me like this, I'm going to report you.

But his expression was so genuine, with his forehead knitted like that, unintentionally betraying his true feelings. It seemed as if he'd met with a problem that caused him profound regrets. What was it?

Could it be...

I touched my face, then looked at my arm, then into the water itself. The surface of the pool was awash in ripples, and gleamed with reflections from the light. It seemed a little different from what I remembered, and it was hard to see underwater...

Curses.

Did I ruin my face somehow by using too much antidote?

A mirror...

I needed to see a mirror.

I suddenly stood up, preparing to climb ashore. But after half a step, I froze. Han Zichuan was even more shocked than me as he laid sprawled on the ground, staring at me stupidly. "Y-y-y-you..."

I looked down and realized I was naked...

This was very normal. Who would take a bath with their clothes on?

It's just that living in these secluded woods and mountains had weakened my sense of propriety and rites. I'd gotten used to my days with yifu, and the differences between men and women had blurred quite a bit after ten years...

Sometimes I'd take a bath and see Fang Hua nearby, playing a tune on his qin, so I learned to stop wondering at strange sights. As time passed, I could even rub myself down without giving him half a thought, each of us absorbed in our own tasks...

This was probably retribution for cause and effect.

Between yifu and I, a third person appeared, and now everything had changed...

Now someone was here to tell me the differences between men and women.

When I looked back, Han Zichuan was already out of breath, physically paralyzed on the rocks in a position beautiful to behold. He feebly raised his sleeve to point at me, his finger shaking as he forced out the words. "You... ..y-y-you're actually a girl?!"

And then his eyes roved up and down...he looked completely startled.

Can someone tell me what kind of expression he was making now?

I am a girl...

That's right.

I came out of the water and he saw everything...

The expression on his face looked startled, and as if he'd been tricked.

Hmph!

I narrowed my eyes and rubbed my chin, my face displeased as I approached him.

"Y-y-you, we can talk about this calmly...it's not appropriate for girls and boys to mingle[1]." His clothes were actually drenched with sweat,

and a terrified blush had crept onto his face, enough to make the base of his ears[2] turn red.

I leaned down and scooted over. His eyes grew even wider.

My hand groped around him and tugged as he tried to get away and fell over the rocks. "Hmph, respected senior...you're lying on my clothes, so how can I put them on?"

His face was filled with grief and indignation. He wanted to retort, but hastily retreated, curling up with his back facing me.

"...you're a female, how could you be so audacious?"

I lowered my head to leisurely tie my sash, putting on the rest of my men's robe as I took large, elegant strides to stand behind him. I leaned to blow a puff of breath at his ears, and spoke in a careless tone, "Yifu's never raised me as a girl."

"Brother Shao!" he suddenly turned around, out of breath.

My eyes curved like crescents and I smiled. He grew astonished, before his face softened to give me an absentminded look. "Hmph...a good man doesn't fight with women."

The wind blew past, and the willow catkins stirred. The leaves of the bamboo swayed in the wind.

The fresh scent of bamboo mixed with the breeze to be carried up in the air.

[1]girls and boys to mingle (男女授受不清) —nan nv shou shou bu qing, meaning girls and boys who were similar ages shouldn't casually seek each others' company. If I remember it right, in traditional society each gender kept to themselves. It was a breach of etiquette, and borderline scandalous, to go make friends with a boy if you were a girl, and vice versa. [2]base of his ears (耳根) —er gen, I think this is the pen name of the author for I Shall Seal the Heavens too! That aside, I'm putting this note here because in English we usually say, "the ends of his ears turned red" when a guy's embarrassed, but Chinese likes to focus on the opposite, saying the "base of their ears", or the part connecting their ears to the rest of their head.

Chapter 16: Confronting Yifu

Han Zichuan really was a good man who didn't fight with a woman.

No matter how I made fun of him, he still kept his eyes downcast. When I moved closer to take a look, he actually turned his face away to speak. "You...keep your distance from me."

"Che, it's not like I'll miss out on much," I gave him a side glance, before stooping over to pull up a patch of grass. "Teasing you is a lot less fun than yifu."

He seemed stunned. I brushed aside my sleeves and messily gathered up my damp hair, holding it in place with my red wood hairpin.

"Fang Hua really didn't raise you as a girl these past ten years?" Han Zichuan suddenly blurted out.

The sunlight just happened to get in my eyes then, and I squinted when I turned to look at him. He stared back blankly, as if dazed. After a long time, he finally tore his eyes from my face to rest above my head.

"Your yifu is a Fang Hua Beast...right?"

Not wanting to reply, my lips pursed as I glanced at him and resumed walking away.

He followed behind me without a word. The two of us walked softly, one in front of the other, the silence occasionally broken by the sound of falling leaves. When his voice rose again, it was as bright and clear as jade. "Fang Hua withdrew from the world to live here. He's used to living quietly by himself, yet he took you in as his adopted son."

The wind blew gently, carrying along the sweet, indistinct fragrance of flowers and a unique scent that smelled like medicine to settle in my very bones.

"He treats you extremely well..." Han Zichuan's voice paused. "He even gifted you with a Fang Hua Wood."

This particular sentence piqued my interest and I stopped, gazing at him out of the corner of my eyes. He was fixated on the hairpin in my hair, standing still beneath the willow trees as if turned to stone. There was still a soft, mild smile on his face, and an excited, if hesitant, expression in his eyes.

His current face and bearing felt a little odd to me, but I couldn't tell where it was wrong. I hesitated, then touched the hairpin, only to see his eyes light up. My heart started to pound, and I withdrew my hand. "...this hairpin was made from Fang Hua Wood? Is it very important to my yifu?"

He replied, "You can ask him."

"You've seen Fang Hua Wood before, right?" I narrowed my eyes at him, trying to guess from his expression. "I wear this hairpin everyday, so why tell me this now?"

His face looked as if it wanted to smile, but the smile was a pained one. "Fang Hua Wood is an exceedingly precious thing that can nullify hundreds of poisons. There are always people searching for it, and I've had the luck to see one in the past as well. The one you have now is a little different. I'm only guessing so I can't be sure, but the changes in your body today are probably related to this wood. That's what finally convinced me."

My heart stopped.

He just clasped his hands[1]. "I'm a bit tired, so I'm going to go on ahead." He seemed as if he was troubled about something.

Che, this person...what's his problem?

His moods shifted quicker than a person turning the pages of a book. Before long, he'd already disappeared without a trace. I stood there looking around for a bit before leisurely walking back to the house. I closed the door, pulled out my hairpin, and examined it closely in my hand.

My head bent down as I got even closer to take a sniff, but it wasn't the same fragrance I'd smelled before.

Was this really Fang Hua Wood? It didn't look much different from regular mahogany wood. It felt warm as I grasped it in my hands...

From the expression on Han Zichuan's face just now, it was easy to tell that he had been hiding something. Aish...what could it be? I sucked in

another breath and placed the hairpin on a low table. Absentmindedly, my eyes caught sight of my bronze mirror and my heart stopped. I paused for a second and slowly walked over, a feeling of impatience in my heart.

To tell you the truth, it'd been a while. Besides knowing my skin was now a little whiter, I had no idea what I looked like. The reflection given off by the bronze mirror was blurry and pale yellow, but as I came closer, the imager grew clearer.

There stood a figure dressed in men's robes. Despite this, the clothing couldn't hide the lithe and graceful curves of a woman's figure, and the effect it gave off was a mixture of a manly, unrestrained spirit and a delicate, feminine air. It was an irresistibly dreamlike vision that made it hard for one to look away.

My forehead wrinkled.

Compared to before, I couldn't even measure how much better looking I was now...

Suddenly, a fine voice carried over from behind me.

"Did you get rid of the poison?" An extra voice rose out of the air, startling me.

Another figure appeared in the mirror to stand behind me. A cinnabar mark below the eye^[2] framed a pair of beautiful pupils, filled with feelings of tenderness.

"When did yifu open the door and come in? I didn't even realize."

"Not so long ago. I kept thinking of you, so I came to take a look." He grasped my shoulder and turned me around, smiling as I faced him.

His eyes were full of warmth.

We were so close that his breath tickled my cheeks, and the sensation made me a little restless. My heart started beating wildly, and I unconsciously took a few steps back, hand pressing against a low table until it brushed against something and knocked it to the ground with a noise.

"Yikes..." I lowered my head.

What fell down?

But he used his hands to raise my head, gently stroking my forehead as he peered at my face. I blinked. When he spoke again, it was in a tone that had never sounded so genial before, warmer than the spring breeze. "You look just like your father..."

Ah...

What was going on now?

Fang Hua knew my family, could it be that...

"You're familiar with my father?"

"That's a thing of the past..." he smiled gently, though it seemed a little anguished, his eyes still fixed on me. "But I only remember him faintly now."

He didn't say anything else, only stroking the hair that covered my face as he fell into silence. On the other hand, my heart kept on thumping like a drum. So he really hadn't picked me up by coincidence to raise me... that meeting at the dilapidated temple was done with conscious effort. In other words, he came looking for someone on purpose that day?

The human skeleton on the yellow soil tomb...and the cloth I found in its robes...

I suddenly opened my eyes wide, backing up a giant step until I hit the wooden table again. My eyebrows furrowed as a sharp pain hit my waist, bitter beyond words.

He pulled my hand with only a little bit of strength, and I tumbled into his arms. He smiled, and started petting my head like he would a child's.

"It's been so many years, but you're still just like him. You can't be so muddleheaded. In the future, you'll have to start a family and make a living[3]."

Start a family and make a living?

Was that a joke...

Startled, I blurted out, "I can't do that."

"Why not?" the corners of his lips drew up.

Because, who ever heard of a woman starting a family and making a living, or picking a wife to go with it?

"Think it over carefully, there's no rush." He stroked my hair comfortingly, raising his slender eyebrows. The look in his eyes seemed to say, take your time to make up an excuse...there's no rush...

Hmph.

I lowered my head and began. "It's because—" my eyes darted in quick circles, "—I want to stay with Fang Hua for the rest of my life."

As soon as I said it, I felt like biting off my tongue. I docilely lowered my head and stole a peek at him. This was my first time calling him Fang Hua.

He smiled, his entire face filled with gentleness. He didn't seem angry that I called him by his name, but rather comfortable about the whole thing. The cinnabar mark by his eye resembled a teardrop, and he heaved a low sigh into the air. "Who can really stay by whose side...?"

I was surprised.

"After a few years, Shao'er will become an adult. You are different from me, and can't always stay by my side." Even though he sighed with feeling as he said these words, his next action was to embrace me. I closed my eyes and relaxed in the warm hug, surrounded by soft cloth as a fragrant aroma assaulted my nostrils. It was a sudden scent that made me look up at Fang Hua in a half-trance. Time really passed quickly...

Even though he sighed with feeling as he said these words, his next action was to embrace me. I closed my eyes and relaxed in the warm hug, surrounded by soft cloth as a fragrant aroma assaulted my nostrils. It was a sudden scent that made me look up at Fang Hua in a half-trance. Time really passed quickly...

When I first came here, I was as tall as his knees, but now my height reached his shoulders. Still, he looked as same as the first time I laid eyes on him.

It really was a pity to simply call him yifu.

The wind blew gently, rustling the paper windows. Faintly, one could hear the sound of Han Zichuan walking around outside, preparing to bring in the plants that had been left to dry in the sun. Fang Hua gave an exclamation of surprise, staring at a point before releasing me and bending down. "Although something like this can't be broken..."

He picked up the hairpin that had fallen to the floor and blew on it. "When you drop this next time, make sure I don't see it." So speaking, he

drew up his sleeves and carefully wiped it with the cloth. Then taking it in his hands, he prepared to do my hair for me.

I gave a start as I stared at the fiery red hairpin, thinking back to the beginning. I grabbed him by the hand and asked, "Yifu, is there anything you're not telling me?"

He stood stunned. "I secretly drank half a jug of wine today."

"No? I dug up the cabbage[4] you planted in exchange for a chrysanthemum plant because I thought that tasted better."

" ... "

Forgive me, but I'm mad.

"You know this isn't what I'm asking about," My eyes narrowed as they moved to the red wood hairpin. "A hairpin made from Fang Hua Wood, and my father...everything about all these things, I need to understand."

He suddenly gave me a cold, melancholy smile.

[1]clasped his hands (供了拱手) —gong le gong shou, a motion where both hands are brought before the chest, one in the shape of a fist, the other clasped around it. A traditional way of greeting each other or saying farewells, usually accompanied by a bow. [2]cinnabar mark below the eye (眼角下的朱砂) —yan jiao xia de zhu sha, Chinese is ambiguous,

but later chapters confirm he has one mark/mole under his left eye.

[3]start a family and get a job (成家立业) —cheng jia li ye, is exactly what the English means, though in this case it's heavily implied from a male perspective. A man should settle down with his own family and start his career so he can support them. It also implies he should get a wife as well.

[4]cabbage (白菜) —bai cai, this would be Chinese cabbage, also known as Napa cabbage, white at the base and framed with light green leaves. Great in hotpots, by the way.

Chapter 17: The Mystery of My Father

I didn't know a person could smile like that.

The expression on his face was obviously a smile, but it was filled with a grief that stirred my feelings to a point where my heart ached. The more beautifully he smiled, the more intensely I felt that pain.

"You guessed right. This is Fang Hua Wood, but not just any variety. Ordinary people know that Fang Hua Wood can nullify tens of thousands of poisons in the world, but they don't know that there are two types. One type comes after the death of a Fang Hua Beast, and it can expel 100 poisons. The other type comes from the wood left behind in the dirt after a Fang Hua Beast is born and takes on human form. That one can only keep away pests and snakes, but it's even harder to find."

I knitted my eyebrows and asked him, "How come?"

He gave a mysterious smile. "It's the same principle as a baby being born. Preserving the placenta is like burying the wood in the soil."

"So then..."

"This really is something very valuable, so you should take good care of it."

I was speechless. In other words, this thing couldn't dispel any poisons at all.

"You don't like it?" he looked at me, speaking softly. "But I really wanted to give it to you." He smiled again, and it felt like I was struck by lightning. I felt a bit unclear.

"Yifu, don't change the topic."

He was briefly alarmed before taking a seat on a long bench, calmly looking outside the window. I sprawled by his legs, nestling up as I looked up with the hairpin clutched in my hands. "Tell me about my father."

His hands slowly stroked my hair, his voice as gentle and soft as a woman's. But the sound left me cold. "Don't you already know...?"

Shocked, a sense of unease rose in my heart, and I made a move to leave. But his hand found the back of my head again and pulled me lower and closer.

"You went to the grave at the yellow earth mound, didn't you...the corpse nestled by its side was your father. Good Shao'er, you've forgotten this despite having such a good memory. Do you remember what was written on the sheepskin cloth in his robes? You've read it yourself." His hands unhurriedly stroked my cheeks, reciting it word by word.

"When those days ended, I felt disconsolate and empty over the fact that we couldn't meet. The happy times of then are now as distant as the divide between Heaven and Man. Early on, a thousand li already existed to keep us separate. I was the one who didn't treat you well enough back then. Now I'll use my own life to make it up to you. I just hope that after

you return from the grave, you can look after that child. This way, even if I die...I will be content."

His eyelids drooped, and with every sentence he spoke, the cinnabar mark at the corner of his eye trembled.

I didn't know what kind of tone he was using to make those few lines sound so cold. I just knew the Fang Hua speaking now made my heart ache, and I quickly grabbed his hand. "Yifu..."

He grew aware of my presence, and turned his head to smile at me. "My memory isn't very good. But I've remembered those words for a lifetime, so I'll never forget them again."

A truth like this was crueler than any lie.

It made my head spin...

My father acted wrongly towards Fang Hua out of personal feelings... what kind of entanglements did they get into in his past life?

"Shao'er, I've already been through a cycle of rebirth. I've forgotten a lot of things from my past life. I can only dimly recall your father's face and the letter he left by the grave before he died. I went to take care of you, his child and only son."

Son...

Wait a minute, I'm female.

Are you sure your memories didn't make a mistake somewhere?

Looking at the pleasant smile on his face now, I suddenly felt mute. Straightening up, I buried myself in his embrace. His body was rigid, but he made no sound as he held me. Strands of fragrant scent entered my nose, and a warmth filled my entire body, making me reluctant to part...

Yet my mind was utterly disconcerted with ten thousand tangled thoughts.

There had to be some sort of misunderstanding in the middle of all this. Yet, even if everything had been wrong from the start, I had no desire to pursue the matter any further.

Whatever happened between them was from a former life, and had nothing to do with me. I just wanted to stay with Yifu for the rest of my life. Though I thought this way, my heart was even more uneasy, and I buried myself deeper into his chest.

"If you were as spoiled then as you are now, how nice that would be," A warm and sweet atmosphere surrounded the two of us. Fang Hua lowered his head to smile at me, still stroking my hair...

The door—

—opened with a bang.

Willow catkin seeds swirled in the air like thick snowflakes, rushing into the room. Han Zichuan stood right outside the door, carrying some medicinal plants in his hands. He stared at us stupidly, a few flower petals resting on his shoulders.

I blanked out.

Fang Hua didn't, but he did push me to one side. I fell on the floor..

Curses, did he really need to give me the cold shoulder?

Fang Hua slowly stood up, probably feeling what he'd done was inappropriate, and bent down to help me up. Then he smiled at the other and asked, "Why did you come in?"

Only now did Han Zichuan recover his bearings. He looked at the medicinal plants in his hands with a startled expression and said, "I decided to tidy these up since they'd been drying in the sun for a long time. There's not much silver left in the house, so I thought I'd find you for some pills to use for exchange outside."

His eyes were still staring fixedly at the point where our hands met. It was a long while before he raised a head to smile at me. But this smile...

...it made me feel a little uncomfortable, as if he was doing something sneaky behind his back. I lowered my head and peeked at him from a different angle...oh, this floor was really clean with barely any dust on it.

Fang Hua muttered to himself before pulling out something from inside his sleeves and opening up his palm. When I took a look, I saw two or three pocket-sized bottles there.

My sleeves hastily pushed aside the approaching Han Zichuan as I grabbed the bottles and weighed them experimentally in my own hands. "Yifu, you and Han Zichuan rest at home. Leave it to me to sell the pills."

Fang Hua smiled, straightening up his slender form as his hands vanished back into his sleeves. His silence was equal to a tacit consent.

Nowadays, even he had to admit that years of living in seclusion made it hard for him to find his bearings in the markets. Once, I went strolling with him in the streets. It wasn't long before a person bumped against him, followed by another and then another. He'd only smile at them after it happened.

When they left, he'd point at their retreating backs and say he was extremely familiar with these people. When I asked him why, he said it was because they were always bumping into him. I had stared into the skies, speechless, before giving him a glance.

When he lowered his head to feel around his clothes, his expression had shifted. You didn't need brains to figure out that all of his money had been stolen.

Han Zichuan was even more hopeless...

When the house ran out of silver, he would take some medicines to

exchange them for other things. At first I wasn't certain if he'd come back with enough money for us to use, and yet...

He was pretty good at turning a profit, but even better at spending those profits.

As soon as he stepped back inside the house, the imposing vision that greeted us was...

Two or three young boys carrying in colorful rolls of cloth, various cakes and pastries, objects which ranged in size from a single piece of firewood to the size of a carriage, all bought for our house. Not only did we lose the money from selling the medicine, but there were quite a few loan slips in his robes as well.

So.

After rolling my eyes a few times at the two people in my rooms, I placed the precious bottles in my robes and exited the doors.

I straightened my posture and took a long breath, free from the atmosphere in that house. Looking back, I saw their dazed, dumbfounded figures.

Heh.

If it wasn't for me...

...how would those two even survive?

Chapter 18: Chance Encounter

It was high noon and the sunlight was scorching, so much that even the occasional breeze that wafted by burned as it touched me.

The drowsy assistant of the Hundred Grasses Pavilion was starting to doze off, and the shopkeeper was nowhere in sight. I was fanning myself as I rapped my fingers against the mahogany table. The noise startled the assistant awake, and he blearily rubbed his eyes to look at me.

"Call out your shopkeeper. I've come with some medicines, see if he wants any."

"Oh!" The assistant exclaimed with a panicked look, bowing and scraping in reply. "Please have a seat, young master[1], this one[2] will be with you right away!"

I thought it was kind of funny.

He probably didn't recognize me. Usually, this assistant called me a little black whelp, but now he was earnestly using 'young master.'

Sweeping my robes aside, I took a seat on a chair, tapping my knuckles as I looked around, bored. I dug in my sleeves and took out the medicine bottles, giving them a glance before tilting them over, pouring a few pills into my hand.

The spherical pills were dark in color. I brought them to my nose and took a sniff, catching the scent of Fishy-Smell grass[3] and hundreds of different flowers, cool and refreshing beyond compare.

This should be the Five Measure Dispersions[3].

Just by keeping one in your mouth, you could render all sorts of poisons ineffective. I took another sniff, before putting it back.

Actually, I could guess what it'd be even without looking. Every time Fang Hua made pills, they were either for dispelling unusual poisons or prolonging one's life. After staying by his side for so long, I'd picked up a few tricks of the trade as well.

He was very familiar with the properties of different medicinal plants and able to concoct antidotes for any type of poison. Gradually, I began creating strange mixes of my own.

He claimed that a mix of seven parts Stomach-Cutting Grass with three parts Five Stone Dispersions would end a life, but I didn't think so. I'd mix up the plants in proportions of five parts to five, two parts to eight, or four parts to six to try them out. Although the effects weren't as effective as three parts to seven, it still amused me.

If you wanted to destroy the five organs (heart, liver, lungs, kidney, spleen) but preserve a person's life, then a two parts to eight formula was the way to go.

If you wanted to leave them half-dead, tossing and turning for three

days until death, then a four parts to six formula was the most effective choice.

As for a violent death, nothing could beat a one parts to nine formula.

I stuck my hands inside my sleeves and gave a sigh.

"So it seems the pill residence not only had a Young Master Han, but another excellent young master as well. Please pardon me for not coming out to greet you earlier." The shopkeeper lifted aside the door curtains as he entered.

I opened my eyes and looked at him.

"What pills did you bring over today?" He took the ones in my hand, gave them a sniff, and brightened. "Shall we still use the usual prices?"

"It's up to you." I gave a casual wave before pulling out the porcelain bottles, tossing them up and down in my hands.

"Young master, please...be careful."

I looked at him, eyes sweeping over the pills in his hands before giving a derisive laugh and a hmph. Then I continued tossing the bottles as before.

"I...i-it is a little low, I'll add a bit more," his lips twitched into a smile as he pulled out two more taels of silver, adding them to the group on the

counter to make five.

I gave him a genial smile and tossed the bottles over. "Thanks."

Sweeping the silver into my bag, I tied it by my waist. With a pat, I turned to head out the door when...someone knocked past me.

I felt around my waist and found it empty.

Curses, what a classic setup.

I turned around to chase after a familiar figure. These little thieves, they purposely picked on strangers and weak, elegant-looking lordly types, but today they actually messed with me...

"You rascal, stop running!"

At my shout, he ran even faster. Look at this guy's sturdy arms and legs. He must have stolen quite a bit from Fang Hua in the past, or else how could he have eaten enough to look so robust? His smooth getaway left a trail of dust behind. The more I saw, the angrier I got.

I lifted some internal energy from my dantian[5] region and used some of my lightness ability to chase after him, wiping sweat all the while. I couldn't believe I had to do such strenuous exercise in this type of heat. Just wait, after I caught up he was going to pay me two more taels of silver as compensation.

Before long, a sedan chair appeared in front of us. It looked like the boy was going to use the chance to duck behind one side and slip away. I groped around in my robes until I pulled out two paper packets filled with powder. Then I tossed them out before me.

His footsteps faltered, and he crashed against the sedan chair, causing the whole thing to shake. The paper pellets hit the ground, dispersing the powder.

I raised a sleeve to cover my face, still staring at the thief.

A wind picked up and stirred through the trees, scattering the powder in everyone's faces. The sedan-chair bearers and assorted company exchanged looks with each other, their faces shocked.

"Protect...the imperial physician..." Even before they finished speaking, their eyes rolled up into their heads, and they collapsed.

This time, it wasn't just the little thief who fainted, but seven or eight people surrounding the sedan chair as well.

Without really grasping the situation, I bent down to rummage around boy's clothes. Suddenly a cat meowed, giving me a fright. I quickly tugged out a money bag and tested its weight in my hand...it was quite heavy.

"Next time, don't learn to steal from others, or else big brother will take you to court." I prodded him with my foot before standing up and preparing to leave. Strangely enough, heat seemed to be radiating from

his hands and toes...and he wouldn't stop groaning.

Wait a minute...

How could this have happened?

Why was this kid's face so red? I hurriedly looked around me and saw... all the people surrounding the sedan chair paralyzed on the ground, eyes closed as their hands feverishly pawed through their clothes.

I trembled three times and took a step back.

"This elder brother looks young of age, yet his methods are so sinister and ruthless."

A voice as cool and bright as jade rang out from behind the curtain of the sedan chair. It was both serious and earnest, neither gentle nor sickly, but the words seemed to travel straight into my ears. Immediately, my face turned red. I gave a hmph and lowered my head. Someone lifted the curtains of the sedan chair, and the person inside stepped out.

His steps were very firm, and his robes swayed with each step. Those ripples of fabric billowed...in a trance, I looked up at his face. Then I sucked in a breath to restrain myself.

I hadn't been poisoned, so why was I heating up?

"Why did this young master block my sedan chair and release poison?"

he asked with a smile, his tone temperate and mild.

"I didn't meant to offend you. By chance I came across a thief, so I had no choice."

"Your opponent is just a child. No matter how grave his mistake, you shouldn't poison him like this." His eyebrows knitted together, and his expression took on the look of a sage.

Oi, nice guy. I've got plenty more poisons where that came from.

How did I know I'd pick that particular one? Not to mention...if things were desperate, I would've used it anyways.

But then again, exactly which poison did I use? It couldn't have been...?

Startled, I ignored him and turned around, feeling inside my sleeves. One by one, I took out my paper packets of powders and examined them under the sunlight. Slowly, I read the handwriting on each one.

I didn't use any of the Three Steps Idiotic Laughter, Tickled Laughing Buddha, or the Memory Loss Powder.

Unless...

"Stop looking, you used a Drunken Dream of Lovemaking."

[1] young master (公子) – gong zi, while this usually means “prince” or “lord,” it’s often used to generically refer to people of high rank (or at least well dressed people who look the part). For instance, there’s also 君子 jun zi, which is a term for scholarly/gentlemanly types. [2] this one (小的) – xiao de, literally “little me”, or the “humble I.” Just as there are special titles/pronouns for people of high rank, people of low rank use opposing terms to refer to themselves in an obsequious, third-person manner. The waiter who says this is clearly putting himself at a lower social level than his customers. [3] Fishy-Smell grass (鱼腥草) – Yuxing or Houttuynia cordate, a so-called “fishy-smell” grass traditionally used in Chinese medicine to treat pneumonia. Also known as fishmint, heartleaf, bishop’s weed, *etc.* Has small white flowers. [4] Five Measure Dispersions (五文消迷散) – wuzhang xiaomi san, the “five measures disappear and scatter”, rather tricky to translate. Zhang doesn’t really have a specific meaning here, beyond as a unit of measure. It was also a traditional way to hail a male elder. [5] dantian (丹田) – an area inside the body just around the belly button, where Qi circulates. Cultivators and martial artists alike use this area to store, rotate, and take in/expel their internal energies. Think of it as a furnace, powering up energy for magical abilities for the rest of the body.

Chapter 19: Pill-Crazy

Drunken Dream was the name for a top-tier wine.

Drunken Dream of Lovemaking was another name for a certain top-tier good...

There was no way I'd mix these two up.

They said this particular poison had no antidote. You could only use this and that to cure it. As to what "this" and "that" were, I was very curious to know, but Han Zichuan embarrassedly sealed his lips on the topic. I asked Fang Hua, but he didn't understand it either, only took me to the study to research it myself. Thus I once spent half a morning digging through various pill formulas for answers.

Truthfully speaking, though our house was missing many things, it was never short on medicinal plants so I decided to make a version myself. Originally, I wanted a chance to test the drug on Han Zichuan...but I never expected that I'd use it today instead.

What a slipup...

I looked around at the seven or eight people sprawled on the ground, then squatted on the ground, eyes blinking. My face was red as I tried to figure out how they'd cure the poison.

Instead, that handsome man pushed me aside and knelt down instead, rolling up his sleeves. He raised his hand, and a faint silvery light shone from within. Turning it over, he extended his index finger to quickly jabbed the people in various places with blinding speed.

The people stopped groaning, and the flush in their faces faded away. He was going to approach the thief by my side next, but I stood up to block him. "What are you doing?"

"Saving him."

"There's no antidote for Drunken Dream of Lovemaking."

"No, there isn't," he nodded, "But this drug wasn't well-made, so I can cure its effects."

I choked, offended.

He dodged and swerved behind me, rolling up his sleeves as his hand quickly jabbed the thief like a hedgehog in various places.

I was angry...

He actually said my drug was defective!

Curses!

"All right, that should do it."

He lifted his head, using his sleeve to wipe away some sweat. I started shaking as I pretended to look at the skies, my hands groping about inside my sleeves. There was only one pill pellet pinched between my fingers, and another paper packet landed on the boy's body.

He lowered his head, shocked.

Next he turned to look at me, his limpid and clear. His glance was as clean and indifferent as autumn waters. I suddenly felt my face grow hot as I averted my eyes.

"Great sage, go cure the poison."

Hmph.

In the outside world, there's no choice besides acting like a ruffian. Those aren't my words, though.

This poison was personally concocted by me, so very few outsiders knew of it. Those who could cure it had to rely on their skills, especially since this "Tickled Laughing Buddha" was no ordinary drug.

He reached out a hand to check a pulse, before giving some instructions to the bystanders to quiet down the little boy rolling around on the ground, laughing uncontrollably.

Not much later, he carried over a bowl of water that he poured over the child, drenching him thoroughly.

The laughter stopped.

The little thief opened his eyes and looked at the two of us, a little puzzled.

"It's fine now, good child...you can go back." He gave a virtuous smile as if to say, the evil demon has reached his wit's end, he won't threaten you anymore.

Curses... ..

I prepared to go all out.

"You should stop before you go too far." His hand rested on my own, which was digging restlessly through my robes.

I laughed, and gave him an open smile. He was momentarily distracted and lessened the pressure on my hands. I took the chance to withdraw my arm and...

...scattered my entire inventory of poisons.

The little thief closed his eyes as they assaulted his face, before his arms and legs spread out to fall to the ground, unconscious.

I laughed and waved my hand. "You... Don't be shy, go save him."

This time the beautiful person's eyebrows were almost vertical slits. Again he took the boy's pulse, enduring one more time to check beneath his eyelids, the movements less leisurely than before. I guess he was worried about being poisoned himself.

Truthfully, the medical ethics of this person far surpassed that of Fang Hua. He wasn't the type of person to just be a bystander. If the patient had no silver, he'd still save them. Not like my yifu...

Even if you gave him taels of silver, he'd still look on with a cold eye. According to his words, he'd only come to the rescue if Shao'er was on death's door.

Actually, by my guess...if that day really came, he would still drink a cup of tea and have a game of chess with Han Zichuan before respectfully admiring my deathbed portrait.

I sucked in a breath and refocused. When I saw the helpless expression on the beautiful person's face, my mood turned excellent. From my robes, I took out two of the pill bottles I hadn't sold yet and took a sniff before selecting one. I poured a pill into my palm and waved it before the handsome man's face like a rare jewel, then placed it in the mouth of the little thief.

"Three, two, one, wake up."

Groggily, the boy rubbed his eyes and awakened. He gave a start and

scrambled far away from us, his face full of vigilance. He'd been frightened quite a bit.

"Remember, little brother, if I see you stealing people's silver again, I'll have to test out other poisonous powders too!"

"I won't dare, I won't dare!"

He leapt up and disappeared.

Looks like Fang Hua's pills were quite effective. Not only could they cure unusual poisons, but strengthen the body as well...that little punk really got the advantage.

"Could this young master tell me what sort of miracle pill you have in your hand?" The other man clasped his hands towards me, eyes shining with interest as he stared at...the bottle in my hand.

I tossed it over, and he caught it with reverence and awe.

His nose rested by the opening of the bottle and took a sniff before his face lit up with pleasure. Those willow-like eyebrows rose up as he spoke. "Ingenious! Could this young master come a little closer to speak with me?"

I was surprised. As it turned out...

Coming closer for a chat ended up with him taking me to a restaurant

instead. He was liberal with his money, and ordered quite a few dishes with some excellent wine. When he politely stood up to pour, his graceful bearing was remarkable. Afterwards, he sat fondly holding the bottle of pills in his hands.

"Dare I ask if young master concocted these pills on his own?"

I took a sip and glanced at him. "My master made them."

"I see. May I ask the name of this revered master?"

I only gave a snort and ignored him, using my chopsticks to pick through the dishes while sipping another mouthful of wine. He hurriedly stood up and refilled my cup to the brim.

"Please excuse me, I've offended you."

So speaking, he sat back down, furtively touching the pill bottle as if he loved it too much to let it go. I looked at him and found the whole thing a little laughable.

"As it turned out, I've been thinking this bottle's gotten a little heavy. It's a bit inconvenient to carry it around, so I was going to sell it to a shop. If you like it, I'll sell it to you instead."

"Really?!"

I nodded.

After a moment of joy, his eyes dimmed again. "I'm on an official visit at the moment, so I didn't bring along much silver. I'm afraid that young master will be reluctant to part with his cherished possession."

That couldn't be...

I looked him up and down. There was even a white jade lotus hairstick on his head.

The cut of his clothing was resplendent, and bright pearls were sewn onto the sash about his waist. His undergown floated about with his elegant and smart carriage, making him seem like the wealthy young master of a high official's family. That's right...

Back during the incident with the sedan chair, someone had called him an imperial physician.

At such a young age, he was already traveling in such an imposing, dignified manner. He didn't look like a poor person, so could he really not have a trifling five taels of silver?

"...."

He gently bumped me with his elbow. "Young master, please go ahead and offer a price first."

I hesitated a bit, my five fingers spread out on the table to think... "One

price, and it's this number."

He put on a difficult expression.

I hit the table. "Aish, forget it. In light of the wonderful meal on this table..." I stuck out two fingers. "Just two taels... ..."

...of silver.

"Two taels of gold."

That's right. A person shouldn't be too greedy. This table full of food was probably worth two taels of silver—

Ahh...

I blinked a few times.

What did he say?

Two taels of gold?!!!!!!!

Chapter 20: Lord Nongyu

I cradled a stack of paper money[1] in my hands, completely senseless... there were also ten brilliant gold leaves resting on the table, their veins and arteries delicately carved distinctly into the metal.

I swallowed a mouthful of drool.

Holding back the urge to jump on it all, I took a good look at the man's face. He had a rather apologetic smile. "I left in a hurry, so I didn't bring enough silver taels, but these should be enough to cover the sum of two taels of gold."

I blinked a few times, poking at the mass. "This..."

"Please tell us whatever is most convenient, young master." He was a man with a sagely air, the sparkle in his eyes unusually moving. Occasionally, flashes of well-intentioned feeling flashed in his pupils as he gazed upon me.

I felt like an idiot, my thoughts all awirl.

Two taels of silver.

In a flash, they'd turned into two taels of gold.

I bit myself, then pinched a corner of my face, twisting the skin.

It hurt...

Then I quickly opened up my sleeves to accept the lot.

"Young master's temperament is both generous and straightforward. Come, have a drink." His face was wreathed in smiles as he stood up to pour more wine for me. A sweet fragrance rose from inside his sleeves, mixed with the unique odor that all men had, making me feel a little dizzy.

The more I looked, the more I thought this young master was quite handsome.

"That's right, it's been this long but I still don't know young master's respected surname?" His magnanimous posture while pouring the wine had the elegant carriage of a young gentleman. It was obvious he had a good grasp of ceremony and propriety.

"Shao..."

He stopped to look at me. My eyes did some quick calculations as I waved the cup between my fingers with a smile. "My surname is Shào, and my given name is Yu[2]."

While in the outside world, one must not only be a ruffian, but act shamelessly when the situation called for it.

If he knew the prices for these pills were so low in the surrounding shops, wouldn't he find me to cause trouble? I lowered my head to take a sip from my wine cup, raising an eye towards him. "And how shall I call you, young master?"

He smiled as if reading my thoughts. "This one..." He slowly opened his mouth and spat out two words. "Nong...Yu[3]."

Choke.

I didn't manage to hold it in, and spewed a majestic stream of alcohol.

I called myself Shào Yu, and he called himself Nongyu (fooling around with Yu).

No matter how I listened to it in my head, it still sounded strange...

He lowered his head to rub off the bits of liquid on his robe as if he didn't mind a bit. The next time he saw me, his eyes were like limpid pools of water. I shrank back, turning my body as I thought to myself. Was I being too suspicious? No matter how I looked at this, it didn't seem so simple.

He seemed to have seen through my misgivings, and put down his chopsticks to offer me food. A smile flashed on his face. "I won't hide it from young master. I'm an imperial physician for the emperor that came here to search for valuable medicinal plants. Unexpectedly, I ran into you...young master is very young, yet you have so many poisons and

miracle pills on your person. Thus, I have a presumptuous request."

He paused then, as if he found it difficult to speak. I lifted my eyelids to peer at him. I didn't say much, but docilely lowered my head to drink my wine.

It was good alcohol...

Very savory.

Although it wasn't as clear and sweet as the stuff I brewed for yifu, it had a marvelous strength behind it. I gave it a whiff and smiled until my eyes curved into crescents, pouring myself another cup.

His expression seemed embarrassed as he stammered and sputtered. "I hope that if you have good pills in the future, you can save them for me."

"No problem..." Two words, succinct and pithy.

An expensive fellow like you offered prices that surpassed the highest ones from other stores. Who else would I sell to?

He seemed extremely happy. "Young Master Shào really leaves a person refreshed and comfortable. To understand me so well makes me want to swear oaths with you as your sworn brother."

You're mental.

We've only chattered a few words and you already want to be sworn brothers?

Pfft. Pah! I spat on the ground.

He actually pretended he didn't see a thing, and reached out with both hands to warmly grab my sleeves, refusing to let me go. His eyes kept a firm stare on my face. I wanted to pull away, but found that I couldn't.

His eyes were shining. "I never thought Little Brother Shao's internal energy was so deep and vast."

I glanced over and saw his finger resting over one of my acupuncture points.

Curses...

I waved him off and backed up a few steps, clasping my hands together. "It's nothing, my martial arts skills are shallow at best, not worthy of any mention."

He laugh good-naturedly and pulled me over again, speaking softly. "Everything in this town is good, besides the people pretending to sell good meat with dog meat[3]... I took a stroll today and actually saw the pharmacies selling the Nine Fragrances Green Tea pill for only three taels of silver, how could that be possible?"

It was actually very possible because Fang Hua usually sold them for one or two taels.

I shot the sky a despicable look, and shrugged off the hand resting on my shoulder.

After expressing his heartfelt sentiments, Nongyu's feelings turned sober. He grasped my hands and gave a loving glance at the bottle of pills on the table, saying leisurely, "It's only Brother Shào's pills that are the genuine article, and himself an honest, upright person."

Inside my heart, I was crying.

I felt oppressed to the point of beating my chest with my fists.

Nice people were really easy to swindle. He was certainly a piece of work.

"That's right, I wanted to ask you about a certain matter." It seemed like he remembered something. He made a motion to invite me over to my seat, rolling up his sleeves to pour me another cup of wine. As his eyes swept across the scene, they caught on to a sight downstairs, enough to forget the cup of wine even after it overflowed.

"Lord Nongyu?"

"I'm really sorry! Please pardon me—I didn't splash your robes, did I, Brother Shao?" He withdrew his gaze to mysteriously inspect our surroundings, before scooting closer. "Do you know any men with a mole over this spot?"

He dipped his hands in the wine, a long and slender finger dabbing at a corner of his eye where the tears would flow. I raised my eyebrows in interest.

"You're looking for someone? It's rare to see anyone with a mole there."

Really rare...

He was using his right hand to point at the spot by the right side of his face. Yifu's mole was under his left eye.

However, even if the mole had been in the exact same place Nongyu indicated, I still wouldn't have told him anything.

"I've heard at court that a legendary person who disappeared around these parts a few decades ago has reappeared. So, I made a special trip just to find them. Do you know...they say there's a type of beast called a Fang Hua that can take on the appearance of humans? Although I don't really believe this queer beast exists, I thought I'd give it a look." He shook his head with a bitter smile. "His Imperial Majesty has been ill these recent years, and no medicines have been effective. An official like me should help to shoulder his lord's burdens, so I wanted to search the area where the Fang Hua Beast has appeared before to see if there's any Fang Hua Wood."

"Isn't the Fang Hua Wood capable of dispelling a hundred poisons?"

Could it be...

He gave me a surprised look. "Brother Shào really is experienced and knowledgeable, you're even aware of things like this."

How could I not know? Everyday, someone prattled off the same things to my ear. I could only clasp my hands and reply modestly, "You're too kind. As a student of poisons, of course I would know about their natural enemy."

He smiled in understanding, but I couldn't smile back. Could it be that the current emperor was suffering from an illness caused by poisoning?

If news of this spread, it'd be hard to keep things peaceful.

With yifu's temperament... ..it was still better to restrict his visits to the outside world.

"Then, how long does Lord Nongyu plan to stay around here?" As I poured myself more wine, my chopsticks picked up another bite and I chewed for a bit.

Only silence greeted me.

I raised my head and saw that he was looking downstairs, an extremely focused expression on his face. My heart skipped a beat. I'm finished. It couldn't be that yifu had come out for a stroll...and had been spotted by this guy?

But he'd never come by his own will unless the Heavens started flooding the Earth.

It was still hard to be sure...

Aish, this was irritating.

I suddenly stood up, narrowing my eyes as I followed his gaze to the same direction. There weren't many people on the streets, but the mood was still lively...

It was mainly because some building had opened for business and a few pretty girls were standing at the doors, gorgeously dressed. They waved their handkerchiefs around, hands adjusting their hair as they hailed lords and young masters and gentlemen.

I clicked my tongue.

Tch. I've spent half my life wearing nothing but men's robes. I'd never seen such pretty dresses that showed off the waist and butt...when they swayed, the vision was extremely flirtatious.

Were they involved in the 'embroidery' thing yifu had mentioned before? No wonder their business was booming...

Unconsciously, I spoke my words aloud as my eyes stared.

"Aye..." A light sigh reached me. "Brother Shào, that's not an embroidery business." Nongyu raised his head and studied me thoughtfully. "It's a pleasure-seeking house for men. I heard it's one of the best, called the

Tipsy Breeze Courtyard."

"I know, it's a place to drink alcohol. Does your lordship visit it often?"

He sighed again and turned away. I could see his brows knitting together. "It's not as simple as that. Such an outstanding, distinguished place still has its share of vile and despicable things. It's not a place for virtuous men or scholars to go."

I understood.

After going around in circles, he finally admitted that he'd never gone before.

I smiled and said nothing, pouring myself a shallow cup of wine as I closed my eyes. Suddenly, a shadow drifted past me as a servant went to whisper something in his ear.

"Brother Shào, I have some business to attend to, so I'll go on ahead."

"All right."

He stood up and smiled at me, sleeves swirling in the wind. It was a beautiful sight that I couldn't tear my eyes away from. But he really was a man of action. In the space of a blink, he had vanished with his servants from my sight.

I stayed by myself upstairs, eating and drinking, extremely happy.

Afterwards, I wiped the oil on my hands against my sleeves and went downstairs like some big shot. The golden leaves weighed in my hands as I considered how to report my expenses back home.

Suddenly, I saw a few of the people from next door...that figure, why did it look so familiar...wasn't it Nongyu? Just when I was about to walk up and say hello, he was escorted by a few people into the Topsy Breeze Courtyard.

I thought of how he'd spoken out so righteously: 'Such an outstanding, distinguished place still has its share of vile and despicable things.'

That face, that energy, that sacred light shining on his intelligent mien exactly like a scholarly sage, his words filled with all the traditional virtues[5]...he was simply Confucius reincarnated.

How could he flip-flop so quickly?

I rubbed my chin.

Looks like this Topsy Breeze Courtyard definitely had its share of unspeakable merits. I slowly walked towards a vendor's stall just opposite the courtyard and leaned against a door. In the end, I couldn't resist peeking in the direction of that building.

"Young master...young master, are you interested in any of my wares? Why don't you buy a painting for the trip back?"

Someone tugged on my sleeve.

Ah... ..

I looked back and happened to see, above the vendor's booth, a large, blow-up vision of the stall-keeper's...long-suffering face.

It scared me out of my wits, enough to send my heart pounding. My eyes shifted, and saw the booth was full of paintings of beautiful women. This kind of beauty...

But, their looks still fell short of mine.

My mouth was flat. "I don't want these."

That stall-keeper tugged on my sleeve again and gave me a smile as he refused to let go. Instead, his voice grew smaller, "Young master... ..you're not only distinguished, but attractive and intelligent as well. I knew you were a gifted scholar as soon as I saw you."

After speaking, he even glanced over at Topsy Breeze Courtyard, laughing as if he understood everything. "I know what you want. You're a pleasure-seeker, right?"

What kind of pleasure?

I blinked...

It's fine if I didn't understand.

While one was in the outside world, one had to keep one's cool...

I smiled.

The stall-keeper's eyes grew brighter.

He hurriedly waved me over, turning around to check the surroundings before pulling out a book from beneath the paintings.

"I have the goods for sale at this price." He furtively raised up three fingers. "This is good stuff, freshly done by the artists in that building..."

I took a glance.

Naked men and women hugging each other. The scenes were unbelievably obscene. Flipping through the pages, I discovered, oh... every single picture had them embracing each other, just in different positions.

Now I was amused.

I fished out some silver before sticking the book inside my robes.

"Take care, young master."

I nodded my head and turned around, my mood unbelievably happy as I walked down the streets. Humming a tune while I walked towards home, my image was that of a perfect big shot.

—

“Yifu.”

“Han Zichuan...”

The rooms were quiet, but I seemed to hear the melodious sounds of aqin[6]. My heart stilled, and the smile on my face disappeared. After some hesitation, I walked towards the jade-colored pond in the bamboo forest behind the backyard.

Occasionally, a gust of wind would fill the cool air with a sweet fragrance.

There was the pool with water so clear you could see to the bottom, surrounded by a few stalks of tall, slender bamboo. That was all there was, besides the two people there.

Han Zichuan had his head lowered to play the qin. Behind him stood Fang Hua, instructing him with his fingers.

The sunlight seeped past the bamboo woods to shine upon them both, dazzling slightly. A fresh gale blew past, lifting their sashes in the air while flowers fell like rain.

A white robe was spread out beneath the two as if they were celestial beings. Their eyebrows were as slender as spring willows, their eyes as lucid as autumn waters.

I felt pain from the depths of my heart, and took a few steps back.

But my footsteps faltered, and I nearly fell into the jade pool as my body wobbled sideways. The chilly water ended up soaking through my shoes and socks. My body lost all of its strength, and my mind turned blank as I sat down by the pool.

The sound of the qin ceased abruptly.

"Shao'er, so you've finally come. Zichuan and I waited for a long time." a light, soft voice sounded by my ears.

Not only did I feel unhappy, but rather distasteful all over. I stayed dazed for a while before hurriedly getting to my feet. I dusted off the dirt and said in a very unwilling voice, "Yifu."

Perhaps I had moved too quickly, but all the objects in the front of my robes came tumbling out.

It was like water and flowers flowing in all directions.

A thin book fell down with its pages open, soaking in the pool.

“What are you doing just standing there? Your things fell down.” I didn’t catch when Fang Hua made his way behind me to help out of good intentions. A hand reached out as he bent down. Before the book could sink underwater...

...he fished it up with his hands.

I wanted to hide its contents from him...but he actually shook free the water droplets and flipped it open to take a look.

I’m screwed. Those were the pornographic pictures I’d just bought today...

[1]paper money (银票) —yin piao, or silver draft, a form of paper money in ancient times. [2] Shào...Yu (邵玉) —it’s tricky to tell in English, but originally Shao’er went with the name given to her by her yifu, which was Shao (勺). But since that word has the same pronunciation as ‘spoon’, she went with another one that sounded similar. Shào (邵) is also a surname, while Yu (玉) means jade. You can click on the speakerphones in the Chinese links to hear the difference in pronunciation. [3] Non Yu/Nongyu (弄玉) —(see the Chinese link for pronunciation) this name is a bit funny. We already know Yu is jade, but non is one of those words that stands in for “to do” in the Chinese language. It could also mean to “play with” or “fool with”, so in this case his name might mean “playing/fooling (around) with jade”. Considering Shao’er disguised herself as Shao Yu (Shao Jade), well...you get why Nongyu was smiling now? uwu [4] sell good meat with dog meat (羊肉买狗肉) —yangrou mai gourou. Actually, yangrou translates to “lamb,” but used in this context, it’s an euphemism for good-quality meat. Nongyu uses this idiom to express his disbelief that the pills being sold at the pharmacies are really

those so-called rare, unusual types. [5]all the traditional virtues (任意道德) —renyi daode, the traditional virtues of compassion, duty, propriety and integrity. Used in this idiom, they have a sarcastic, hypocritical meaning. [6]qin (琴) – this may or may not be a zither, depending on the number of strings.

Chapter 21: Pornography Book Crisis

The waterlogged book had its pages all stuck together. It was almost too tragic to look at.

"That..."

I wanted to snatch it away with my hands.

He gave me an indifferent look, neither warm nor imposing, but enough to make me tremble in place. This was how he stood before me, slender fingers flipping page past page as he remained expressionless.

Although the book had been soaked with water, letting some of its ink run, the figures and positions, as well as the actions going underway, were still easy to see. No matter how good his temper was, these clandestine-type pictures would still infuriate him, right?

I bowed my head, docilely staring at the ground in a daze.

From a distance, Han Zichuan walked over with the qin in his arms, his face looking at us in curiosity. Now he had stopped in place, his hesitation obvious.

The dripping book had already made Fang Hua's clothing wet to the point that they were starting to sag. The drops of water made a pitter patter sound the moment they splashed onto the ground.

My heart suddenly felt heavy.

"You...what did you buy?" he looked at me, speaking in a measured tone and pace. The hands holding the book also lowered themselves.

"Shao'er won't dare to in the future," I answered meekly.

He sucked in a deep breath, pinching the book between his fingers as he took a step forwards. The cloth rippled like swaying forms of liquid clouds, and was really quite pretty to see, but today the sight frightened me.

I trembled and quickly backed away, but he grabbed my hand and pulled me towards his chest, resting his head by my neck with a smile. With every breath he took, I felt unbelievably ticklish.

"...thank you very much."

Ah.

What did he say?

He suddenly thanked me...how weird.

Before I could react, yifu let me go, pinching the book between his fingers as he spoke to Han Zichuan. The words made me want to spit blood. "Look at what Shao'er brought me," his eyebrows raised in

satisfaction, even picking one of the most 'stimulating' pictures to wave below the other's face. "See this? Acupuncture diagrams of humans."

At this point, I felt like killing myself.

Are you serious...

"Is that so." Han Zichuan's reply was obviously meant for me. He took ahold of the sopping wet paper before shooting me a glance, looking calm and composed. Only his eyes were full of condemnation, demanding a serious self-reflection. It was getting harder to maintain my smile with my face turning stiffer.

"Hmm?" Fang Hua made a soft noise, then gave a steady smile. He looked up to see Han Zichuan, the teardrop-mole beneath his eye filled with particularly tender feelings. "If you want one as well, buy it yourself next time. I can't give you this one."

I was left at a loss. There he stood waving the book back and forth. Han Zichuan turned aside and gave me a vicious look. The fingers he was using to hold onto the book started pressing down with enough strength to turn them white. I could only remain silent and stare at the skies.

The weather wasn't bad today.

I had the distinct feeling that the stare leveled my way was increasing in killer intent. I steeled myself and looked towards the surrounding trees. Each tree had leaves that were leaves, roots that were roots.

Han Zichuan's eyes on me were filled with an extreme bitterness.

Fang Hua noticed the turmoil within Zichuan's heart and smiled at him, his eyes roving charmingly. Just when the other was struck dumb, he deftly tugged on the book and claimed it back. Then he used his sleeves to wipe away the water staining its surface.

I broke out into a sweat at the sight.

"Yifu, that book's already wet. Why don't you return it to me, and next time..." My eyes turned towards him as I spoke with a genial smile. "I'll buy a new one for you, all right?"

"That won't do." Fang Hua smiled back, a dazzling sight. He was usually such a clean and tidy person, but now he was hugging the wet book to his chest, unwilling to even use the same sleeve he'd wiped the book with to clean my face. "This trip must have been sweltering for you, you're sweating so much. There's still some iced pickled plum soup[1] in the house, I'll bring some over."

I wanted to cry, but I had no tears.

I'm not like this because it's hot, but because you both made me break out in cold sweat.

"As for this..." The outline of the book was just visible within his embrace. He touched it and said, "This is the first gift that Shao'er's even given me. I'm going to have to read it everyday."

His mood seemed excellent as he waved his sleeves and walked off.

I stared after him, tongue-tied.

That book of pornographic pictures...was taken away by him in this manner.

Han Zichuan stared at me again, stuck between anger and amusement. "I'll settle things with you later."

Thus speaking, he followed after him at a quick pace.

A fresh wind blew past, stirring up the fallen leaves. I stood in the midst for a long time, my mind in disorder. Finally, I clutched at my head and decided to stop thinking about it.

I should take care of the important things first.

After checking to make sure no one else was around, I lifted up my robes and ran to the side of the house, next to a giant Wutong tree. Kneeling on the ground, I picked up a small branch and started digging.

The hole I dug was neither large nor small, but just right. I used a handkerchief to carefully wrap up the large amount of paper money and gold leaves, pressing down the corners before putting them in the hole...

I was just about finished. My ears strained to pick up any sign of noise as I threw the dirt back over the opening.

I couldn't help it. This was a trait I'd picked up from childhood. When I was a beggar, I was always hungry, so I got used to hiding my best things in the dirt to give me a chance for survival. Nowadays, there was no way for me to change my habits.

"Brother Shao, what are you doing now?" It wasn't clear when a person had suddenly come to stand behind me, but his question scared me out of my seven emotions and six spirits.

"Han Zichuan." I held the tree branch in my hands...my hands shook with the urge to sweep the dirt onto his face, but I held back and sat with a plop on the ground. "Didn't you go to help yifu? Why'd you come over here?"

He fixed me with a stare. I gave a no-good sigh and smiled as my hand grabbed another fistful of dirt, quietly scattering it over my hole.

"The thing you bought..." He narrowed his eyes and leaned in, quietly. "Was it a pornography book?"

"Your experiences are really broad, I can't hide a thing from you." Then I paused. "What's pornography?"

"You're faking it, aren't you."

He gave me a sideways glance, then looked at the dirt and smiled.

"Don't sit on the ground. I should really bring one of these things back. I've never seen someone act so filial to their yifu before, even buying things like this for him."

Fellow brother...

I bought it for myself. If yifu wanted to steal it away, what could I do?

I was sullen.

Maybe I'd been squatting for too long, but now my legs had turned numb and my feet were listless. I propped myself up, but my stomach felt strange. The insides felt oddly hot and painful.

"Can you give me a hand..."

"What's wrong? You don't look so good." He hurried over to support me, eyebrows knitted together. After a long moment of consideration, he placed a hand on my forehead. "Brother Shao, do you feel unwell somewhere?"

I did feel a little unwell...

I leaned against a tree and pushed him aside.

But he came back over, still worried, and prepared to support me again.

“What are you two doing?” a slow and gentle voice rose up, its tender delicacy pierced with a certain coldness.

Both of us were startled.

[1] iced pickled plum soup (冰梅子汤) —bing meizitang, how do I describe it...it's not made using fresh plums, but preserved/pickled ones that have a tartness to their sweetness. You boil with with sugar in water I think, and then let it cool...it's really refreshing for summer! I wouldn't call it a soup, it's more like a drink, but it's cooked like a soup so....???

Chapter 22: A Daughter's First Menses

Han Zichuan and I were locked in a...rather questionable position.

This, I understood very clearly.

Fang Hua watched the two of us quietly, and a flash of loneliness appeared in his eyes. His eyebrows twisted into an expression of melancholy, making him look wholly desolate. I hurriedly pushed Han Zichuan aside and straightened up with an awkward smile.

A moment later, Fang Hua's eyebrows smoothed out, and the chaotic feelings he'd shown before gradually dispersed without a trace. As if everything I saw before was just an illusion. When I looked at him again, he was wearing a small smile. An aura of gentle refinement hit me full-on in the face to steal my breath away.

"I brought over some iced syrup drink for you two, but neither of you showed up after I called."

I was shaken.

He took the chance to place a bowl of iced pickled plum soup into my hands, eyes drifting to the place on my waist where Han Zichuan had rested his hand, and smiled. It looked rather pained.

"Thank you..." I murmured softly.

Yet Han Zichuan only rudely took the other bowl from his hands before wrapping his hand around my waist to speak. "Brother Shao isn't feeling well, hurry and take his pulse."

I recovered my breath and hastily refused. "It's already a bit better, don't trouble yifu."

Fang Hua raised his eyes at me, before pulling up a sleeve and wrapping a hand around my wrist. I was afraid to even take a deep breath.

Frowning, he briefly muttered to himself as his fingers jabbed here and there. The face staring at me had a rather strange expression.

"What's going on?" Han Zichuan couldn't help but speak.

He gave voice to what I wanted to ask most.

Yifu seemed unable to make up his mind. "I've never come across a pulse like this before. It's a little strange...as if you're missing Qi and blood."

Han Zichuan jerked as if he'd heard history's biggest joke. "You're talking about him? How is that possible? Every time there's something tasty, he eats two-thirds of it. How could he be missing Qi or blood?"

I gave him a vicious glance.

"Jerk, I have a big appetite."

I grabbed his bowl of iced pickled plum soup, taking two towards the stone table in the courtyard. I allowed him to feel as flustered and exasperated as he wanted, ignoring him the whole time I took sips from both bowls. Yaah...it's really tasty, nice and pleasantly cool.

Fang Hua smiled faintly and followed behind me, selecting a clean stool[1] to sit on. Today he was wearing red robes, and his shiny black hair was tied up in a side twist. lazily trailing over a shoulder. One hand rested on his cheek as he lowered his head, and a pensive look on his face made his eyebrows seem even longer. He was a male, yet his appearance had a female's alluring charm, making it hard to look away.

Han Zichuan sat on one side, cooling him furiously with a fan from who-knows-where, giving a look full of resentment towards the two bowls of iced pickled plum soup protected within my grasp.

A slow breeze wafted across the three of us.

The folding fan in Han Zichuan's hands carried Fang Hua's unique scent over my way. It was extremely refreshing with the wind that occasionally stirred through my strands of hair.

From the angle I was sitting at, I could indistinctly make out Fang Hua's clothes rippling slightly. His outer robes were red, but his inner robes were snow-white, giving his entire person an incomparably cool and refreshing aura. His long fingers tapped lightly against the stone table, pondering for a long while. Suddenly, he spoke.

"Shao'er, how much silver did you get from selling the pills this time?"

I blinked my eyes and determinedly said, "Five taels." So speaking, I dug out the goods from my robes and placed the silver on the table, shiny and white.

"Not bad at all," Han Zichuan propped his elbows on the table, giving them a glance. "You bought something so expensive, but still had this much silver left over."

Fang Hua's eyes turned into smiling crescents like he was laughing. "Haven't I said it? Shao'er is wonderful."

Ah...

I was very self-satisfied, and my mood turned excellent.

I drank another mouthful of sweet syrup, looking up in time to see Fang Hua patting the object he'd placed in his own robes. I narrowly avoided choking when I saw the corner of the pornography book peeking out. On the other hand, Han Zichuan kept up his fanning, but snuck his other hand over Fang Hua's shoulders, furtively trying to steal the book.

"Shao'er, what's wrong?" Fang Hua carefully turned to look at me.

My heart panicked...

I quickly lowered my head and drank a big mouthful of ice pickled plum

soup. Originally, I wanted to get over my shock, but I didn't expect my insides to give a start as the cool liquid settled in my stomach. A sharp pain spread out from my stomach, so agonizing that my hands started trembling and dropped the bowl, splashing myself all over.

The shock cleared out my mind and I quickly stood up, dazed.

"Silly Shao'er," After his surprise, Fang Hua stood up as well, somewhat at a loss as he wiped me off with his sleeves. "How could you be so careless?"

My robes were a bit wet, but as he cleaned me up, they quickly grew wetter, especially the clothing by my legs, which were stuck together and a bit cold.

"Why is your face so white? Is it heatstroke? I should have been more careful in this heat, and not given you something so cold. Look at me...so muddleheaded." His movements quickened.

It was a little painful...

I took a deep breath and pressed a hand against my stomach. He gave an exclamation of surprise, and slowly straightened, drawing up his sleeve to inspect the cloth.

There were a few spots of blood by the cuffs.

He raised his eyebrows and looked at me...

I gave a start.

The two of us couldn't help but look down. It wasn't unclear when my snow-white robes had become speckled with cherry blossoms. Bloody flowers covered the entire gown, scattered about by the water I'd poured over myself. It was extremely eye-catching...

Curses.

I'm bleeding!

[1]stool (凳子) —dengzi, for outdoor tables, it's probably some sort of barrel-shaped stone stool like these.

https://www.google.com/search?q=stone+stools,+chinese&espv=2&biw=1237&bih=682&source=lnms&tIHjvMjNAhXEXB4KHd9ND3cQ_AUIBygC

Chapter 23: On Ancient Methods of Staunching Bloodflow

Seeing the bloodstains on my robe left me stunned.

The area by my thighs was bloated with a kind of pain that was hard to describe. My hands were propped against the stone table. I was already having trouble standing steadily, but then Fang Hua started taking a few steps towards me.

"You..."

I backed up a few steps. At this critical juncture, I dreaded him doing something that'd be hard for me to bear. Yet Fang Hua just took my hand and pulled me closer. "Stay still and don't move."

He gave me a gentle look, rolling up his sleeves as he bent down and smoothed out my robes with his hands.

My entire body shivered, and goosebumps rose on my skin. There was a gushing sensation from my stomach, and then something got wet. It was extremely shocking. I had no words beyond widening my eyes to stare at his innocent gaze.

He withdrew his hand to rub at the blood on his fingertips. The next words only added fuel to the fire. "You're bleeding so much. It must be a severe injury."

So he concluded.

Without stopping to wipe his hands, he stuck out two fingers and suddenly jabbed me in various places to seal my pressure points. My breath was fragrant with the scent of alcohol, but his movements made me swallow my words again.

"How is it? Better?" His face revealed an expression of thoughtful concern as he continued to observe my body.

I stood stunned for a while. "I don't really feel anything."

Looking down, I observed on various places of my snow-white robes were scattered three to four red fingerprints, clearly marking out the locations of various acupuncture points.

As if...

"Fang Hua, how can you just carelessly decide to stop the bleeding? Hurry up and unseal her." Han Zichuan stood on one side, anxious yet impatient as he felt me all over.

"How come?" Fang Hua asked.

"Yeah, how come?" I asked dully. "I feel a lot more comfortable now."

"Don't ask about so much nonsense, after all..." Han Zichuan's neck had turned red. He looked away and roughly grabbed Fang Hua's hand, using it to cover me up. Fang Hua's eyes rounded into a smile, and he instantly

unsealed my pressure points.

"It really seems like he's unreliable for these kind of things. I don't even know how your yifu raised you until now." Han Zichuan sucked in a breath, giving me an extremely odd look. He pinched my fingers between his own and said in a very low voice, "Go with me to the house, you clueless little spoon[1]."

But Fang Hua held me back, a little sad.

I was hesitant.

Han Zichuan's eyebrows knitted as he rubbed his temples with one hand. It seemed like he was trying to think of something. His mouth twitched, uncertain of whether he should laugh, yet the look he gave me was firm. He leaned in to whisper in my ear, "You're a girl, and yet you need a boy to teach you about these things."

I blinked a few times. A coldness filled me up, and I became a lot more clearheaded. In fact, I was even beginning to understand him a little. In the end, I somehow left Fang Hua standing there and ignorantly followed Han Zichuan into my room. My clean and tidy quarters had a faint fragrance to them, mixed with the fresh scent of bamboo.

With his back to me, Zichuan wrung dry a handkerchief and brought it over with a basin of hot water. He looked at me once and said in a low voice, "Go behind the folding screen and clean yourself off, then change your clothes."

"Oh." I stood there unmoving, staring at his face. The areas around his eyes, as well as the base of his ears, were both tinged with red.

"Tsktsktsk..."

He stared at me in disbelief. "What are you clicking your tongue for? Are you going or not..."

"You haven't told me what kind of illness this is. How come yifu can't cure it but you can?"

"You're just asking me while knowing the answers." But finally, he came out and said two words[2].

"Ah...I didn't hear it, say it a little clearer," I said with a smile.

"Your period came." As before, the words were feeble and weak, but a little louder. He bit his lips and refused to say anymore, a little angry as he looked away. "Now hurry up, go change."

I held back my smile and slipped behind the folding screen.

I quickly washed down my body, but couldn't resist peeking at Han Zichuan.

He was taking out numerous robes from my wardrobe, picking left and right as he arranged them on a low table. Raising his head, he looked around a few times before taking a knife out of nowhere and cutting my

new clothes into strips of cloth.

What was he doing?

"Here, take this."

A set of clean robes and a long length of silk, as well as two strips of cut cotton cloth, were dangled over the folding screen. I stared at them, not quite understanding, and stuck my head out to ask him, "What's the silk and strips of cloth for?"

"Stick it inside." He gave me a look full of loathing, and rolled up his sleeves. "Do you need me to help you?"

I hurriedly replied, "No need, no need, no need...."

Quickly, I shrank back behind the folding screen, pulling at the strips of cloth as I scratched my head, puzzled.

I didn't get the point.

Why did they turn out like this?

After the time it takes for an incense stick to burn, I could only silently look up at the skies...

My robes fell to my elbows as I lifted my trousers in the air. Han Zichuan

leaned down and used his dexterous hands to tie the length of silk around the waistline with a knot.

So it was like this. The length of silk was kept in place inside around my waist, and the strip of cloth was stuck between it and tied to both ends. Though it slipped around a bit, it could still stay in place with a bit of effort.

Amazing...

Han Zichuan was really amazing.

Now, I understood.

I looked up at him with a reverent expression.

"Before I came here, I saw a lot of females at the imperial court. They all knew a lot more about this than you. Still...I'm not sure if this is quite how they did it." He took the chance to tie my belt, shaking his head quietly. "This is from what I managed to piece together. Clueless little spoon, you have to learn it yourself in the future. It's not proper for boys and girls to mingle, I'm not some Fang..." As soon as he said this, the door slammed open.

Fang Hua stood there, his countenance serene and elegant, but the indifferent gaze in his eyes carried a touch of depression as he shifted his gaze to the two of us. I stood dazed, and my usual call of yifu was suddenly stuck in my throat.

I quickly straightened out my robes.

"Fang Hua, you came." Han Zichuan grabbed me by the shoulder and took me to greet him.

His eyebrows were long and dense, but his mood changed in the blink of an eye. When he raised his head again, his expression was gentle and mild, and he smiled. "I brought some pills over, though I'm not sure if they'll be useful."

As it turned out...

I glanced over, and saw that his arms were loaded with medicine. Fang Hua's heart still had intentions to look after me. I was his only foster son.

My heart started thumping.

Han Zichuan seemed to have read my mind, because he placed his hand on Fang Hua's shoulder next, and steered him outside. "There's something I need to tell you..."

The two of them didn't speak for very long.

When they finished, only Fang Hua returned, his expression as if in a trance. I don't know what Han Zichuan told him, but it gave me a measure of uneasiness.

"I've embarrassed you for all these years, Shao'er. I wasn't a good yifu at

all. There were so many things caused by my oversight." His face was pale and wan, his expression a bit faint. But the look in his eyes was as gentle and soft as a woman's when he pressed a hand upon mine. It felt as if a string was being plucked very tightly in my heart as I looked at him rather helplessly.

Actually, Fang Hua shouldn't say things like this...

He took care of me because of a request from someone who passed away—his only friend. Perhaps he raised me as a boy because he picked up the wrong person from the start. If that was the case, the easy and comfortable life I led for the past ten years was good fortune I took from another.

Perhaps, Fang Hua was already aware from early on. Otherwise, why would he bring back this Han Zichuan?

The scene I saw with them playing the qin together, and the painting I once saw in his study[3], were similar...my heart suddenly sank with a growing bitterness.

"Yifu, Han Zichuan is..."

He raised his head, looking at me in surprise, before bending down with a smile. The mole at the corner of his eye was a dark red that seemed to grow darker, formed in the shape of a teardrop...a startling sight.

Slowly, he replied, "He is a very special person."

[1] spoon (勺) — shao, remember that Fang Hua named our MC Shao'er, but the character for 'shao' means "spoon"... [2]two words — Zichuan was whispering the words for 'period', which in their time period was called 葵水 (kui shui) or 月经 (yuejing). He uses the former here. [3]painting...in his study —you can read about the painting in chapter 7.

Chapter 24: His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince

That day, Fang Hua told me a few other things, but my memory was too hazy to remember. My entire body felt dizzy and heavy, though I managed to hold on to one thing: Han Zichuan was a very special person. Fang Hua thought he was very special.

I couldn't describe the feelings I felt upon hearing those words... I could only toss and turn on the bed, my eyes open the entire night.

Dawn came around five to seven in the morning, when I heard a noise.

I tidied myself up a bit, tied my sash and opened the door, only to see Fang Hua standing outside, a fresh green willow branch behind his back. Soft light spilled on his person, creating a vision so beautiful that it seemed irreverent and profane to even set eyes on his person.

"Aren't you going to let me in?" he smiled softly.

"Yifu, look at what you're saying." I didn't even have time to move out of the way or invite him myself before he brushed me aside and walked indoors. He looked around a bit, brows furrowing, before heading towards the bed. Lifting up his robes, he took a seat.

He really acted casually around me.

"Shao'er, why are you being so distant?" he raised his head and looked over, smiling as he patted the space beside him.

I did as told, sticking my butt to sit by a corner.

It wasn't that I didn't want to get closer.

Just, whenever I smelled the fragrance of flowers wafting off his person, I would start thinking of all sorts of foolish fancies, wondering exactly what the relationship was between him and Han Zichuan. Perhaps...

Han Zichuan was Fang Hua's real foster son.

Fang Hua sighed and turned around. I gave a start, heart pounding. Truthfully speaking, I didn't know when I started reacting like this. I only knew my beating heart carried a feeling that was almost unbearable, yet hard to understand.

"Shao'er, look at you. You're agitated again."

I forced a smile. "Did yifu come looking for something from me?"

"I told Zichuan to prepare some clothes for you, see if they fit." His hands touched a wrapped-up bundle of clothing resting on his knees.

"Yifu, the clothes you give me have all been too big. There's still robes from last year in the wardrobe that I've been saving. I haven't worn them yet."

He smiled as he looked at me, trying to control his expression. Fingers

shaking, he opened up the cloth packaging.

Inside was a unique, brightly-colored pale pink fabric. Beneath that was a dark red silk embroidered with apricots and butterflies.

I blinked a few times.

Was this for me to wear?

Why was it so girly?

His eyes were gentle and soft as a woman's. "Zichuan picked this, the measurements are unmistakable. Next time I'll have him get me one too. This material is really beautiful."

I seized the package, trembling as I spread it open to thoroughly appraise it. It was the type of clothing worn by gentle and graceful females.

"You really want something like this too?" I was highly doubtful. He didn't reply, but took my hand and spoke.

"Shao'er, I didn't think enough of you these few years. I neglected many things." He tilted his head slightly, giving me another smile. My heart violently shrank back. Panicked, I quickly averted my eyes, feeling my ears burning. All I could hear was that furious thumpthump pounding uncontrollably.

Yifu, you beautiful blockhead.

It's not just females, but I bet all the men in the world who saw your face would have the same reaction.

"What are you spacing out for? Why not hurry up and change into those clothes?"

I nodded and hid behind the folding screen, dazedly lifting the two layers of fabric. I moved them around a bit and finally slipped them on.

It felt a little weird.

Though I couldn't tell exactly how...

Before when I put on my robes, they were wide and loose, with lots of extra space left over.

This time, I could only feel that these clothes were a bit tight. I lifted my hand, using my sleeve to cover my chest, and awkwardly walked back out.

He got up involuntarily from the bed, slowly looking me up and down, his eyes especially bright.

"What is it?" I tugged and pulled at the material. "Does yifu think it's a bit strange?"

"I wouldn't." He gently stroked my face, smilingly softly. "Shao'er, you've really grown up."

I blanked out.

He took my hands and brought me before the mirror, pressing lightly on my shoulders so I could sit down, and started to comb my hair...

Though I'd lived with Fang Hua for so long, he'd never been so intimate with me outside of occasional bouts during his drunken periods. The way he was acting now made me feel a little restless.

As seen in the bronze mirror, his bearing was refined and elegant. Though his face was filled with a harmonious warmth, he still exuded a tranquil mildness, and the teardrop-shaped mole at the corner of his eye was a dark red that startled one to see.

"Yifu...you..."

Recently, he'd been acting a little differently than usual. To be closer to a person was obviously a good thing...why did I feel so disturbed and extremely uneasy?

He rolled up his sleeves and grabbed the wooden hairpin off the table, sticking it through my hair with a tilt of his head.

"Shao'er, I'd like to request one thing from you."

I saw the careful, cautious expression on his face, leaning in so close to me. The two people in the mirror looked like they were about to touch.

His breaths brushed against my temples as a strong sense of joy rose within me. This feeling...was like a fine rain falling within my heart, carrying with it a sense of impatient anticipation.

Not just one request. Even if he asked for the hardest thing in the world, I'd still do it for him if I could.

I raised my face in excitement. "As long as yifu tells me to, I'll do it."

"Is that so." he smiled.

I hurriedly nodded my head. Even if it was something like taking these clothes back off, I'd still do it...

"Let me check your pulse..."

Confused, I nevertheless gave him my hand.

His eyes brightened, "Can you describe your symptoms to me?"

"Swollen stomach, sore muscles in the legs, occasional stomachaches..."

"That's really, really, wonderful." I don't know where he got ink, brush and paper from as he recorded these details, the other hand still feeling

my pulse. He raised his eyes to look at me with great eagerness. "What else?"

I really want to find someone to squash him.

Even if I squashed him, my anger still wouldn't be satisfied.

Thus, I was subjected to his repeated questioning for the time it takes three incense sticks to burn.

He still had enough stamina to ask about this and that, but refrained from a physical examination. I endured...I endured until it was unbearable...up to the point that I started thinking of ways to drug him into sleeping.

Then, he suddenly got to his feet.

In the midst of rejoicing and standing up, I smiled at him and said, "Yifu, are you hungry? Getting ready to break off some flower stems and willow branches?"

He turned to look at me, eyes curving. "I have to go to the market and see if there's any medical manuals for sale."

You...

You still wanted to read medical manuals at your level?

You who could make up pills on a whim that were worth two taels of gold?

"Although I was aware that two types of humans existed in the outside world, I never knew the boys and girls Zichuan mentioned were so different. From observing your pulse during this period of time, I can tell the differences are subtle, but too intriguing for words."

Look at this guy...

He's so excited.

"Can't you just find things out from my pulse?"

"I want to read some books about expectant mothers, and how much medicine I should prescribe for females."

I can't help you there.

I looked away wordlessly.

He slowly turned, as if readying to leave.

Suddenly, I widened my eyes, remembering something. Within these streets...there were probably people looking for a person with a teardrop-shaped mole. If yifu went out, looking so beautiful and enticing, Nongyu would definitely find him.

"I'll go I'll go I'll go... ..yifu, you make a list, and I'll buy it for you."

He smiled, as if only too anxious to do so. Seeing him deliberate for the sake of saving silver, writing and crossing out titles of books again and again with a reluctant expression...I began to feel distressed for him in my heart.

This guy.

I had two taels of gold.

Two taels! Of gold!!!

I tugged the paper out of his hands, retracing the titles he'd crossed out. I blew off the spots of ink on the paper and placed it inside my robes. He just looked at me with a lenient smile.

But who knew how pained his heart was inside...at the thought of losing the household silver. I knew from early on that he was lazy when it came to concocting pills. I'm guessing that in order to acquire my new clothes, he spent most of the money in the house.

I sucked in a breath.

After a few days, I should just dig up the gold I buried in the dirt. Even if I kept it buried...it's not like it'd grow another two taels.

So thinking, my steps grew light, and I gallantly ran to town, just

thinking of how I'd secretly dig up the stash of gold leaves and paper money buried beneath the Wutong tree.

But...

I thought it was strange.

Clearly I'd left home alone to buy the medical manuals, so why was Han Zichuan following behind me? And he kept staring so earnestly towards my back, enough for his gaze to turn me numb. Though, speaking of which, I suddenly realized...

The people in town were acting oddly too. One by one, refined-looking young men walked past me, their eyes filled with lust...it made me feel...

I couldn't help but tremble a bit.

Han Zichuan grabbed my hand just in time, his eyes scanning my face.

"I don't even know if dressing you like this helped you or hurt you." Afterwards, he lightly pinched my hand. "Remember, you're a girl. Would any lady walk as carelessly and casually as this?"

"What are you doing here?"

He smiled. "Only Fang Hua would be fine with you coming out alone in front of all these men."

Suddenly, his eyes spotted something behind me, and he said happily, "Wait a bit, I'm going to buy something."

"What are you buying..."

In a flash, he had disappeared, only leaving the cloth sign in front of the shop to proclaim its wares in the wind... ...eee? A store for selling rouge?

Hmph, how could he have any money.

This?! He was hiding a pouch of money!!!

Disgraceful...

When we went back, I was going to tell Fang Hua. My feelings of discontent surged within my heart...I couldn't speak anymore.

Suddenly, someone tapped me on the shoulder.

I turned around and happened to see Nongyu there with a fan, a large retinue following him as usual. The joy on his face, coupled with the stunned look in his eyes, was indescribable. "It's really you...Younger Brother Shào[1]?"

"Or perhaps I should call you..." he skillfully snapped his fan and drew closer with a smile. "Younger Sister Shào?"

What 'young brother, younger sister' are you babbling about.

I'm not that close^[2] to you.

"Who are you waiting for?" he looked around us.

"Of course I'm waiting for..." I smiled back, "My beloved."

The smile on his face became a little forced.

"Shao'er, let's go." Han Zichuan was holding something in a red paper bag as he emerged from the store. His eyes happened to land on Nongyu, and his face froze.

Nongyu's reaction was even more exaggerated. For a long time, he stared at Han Zichuan with a stricken expression, face filled with amazement. Clutching his fan, he suddenly swept aside his robes and fell to his knees.

"Your servant pays respects to His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince!"

Thumping noises rang out all around us...

Everyone was kneeling.

[1] Brother Shào (邵第) — Shao'er told Nongyu her name was Shào Yu back in chapter 20. Again, the Shào here is pronounced differently than the one in Shao'er. [2] not that close (不太熟) — bu tai shou, the term she's using here means "not that familiar", "not that intimate", aka they're acquaintances at most, or maybe friendly strangers.

Chapter 25: Liberties Given, Liberties Taken

Crown prince?

When did this 'crown prince' pop up?

The person that had been with me day after day for all these years, was actually the crown prince?

In a trance, I looked at his profile, noting the handsome eyebrows drawn like a mountain and river painting[1], the smooth, thin lips, the aura of steadfast resolution...

It left my thoughts in disorder.

Why had I never noticed that he carried the air of monarch about him?

Nngh...

The more I looked, the more it seemed that way.

I could see many people kneeling around us.

The noise and bustle of the town, along with its civilians, had all vanished. The deserted streets were chilly and desolate and seemed a bit bleak. Han Zichuan's eyes swept over Nongyu without a word. He only placed the red bag of rouge into my hands, and said lightly, "I'm sorry I

couldn't buy you a nicer one. When I return to the imperial palace..."

He didn't say any more, but took my head and gave me a long look. I bit my lip and wanted to laugh, but found myself suddenly lacking the energy.

These things had already surpassed my level of comprehension. My head was in a fog as he pulled me past the crowd of kneeling people. Like thus, I trailed after him with all the rest back to the house.

Han Zichuan shook off the large crowd to enter Fang Hua's room alone. I was the only one left to serve these gentlemen.

"...Younger Sister Shào," Nongyu said, holding his cup. "It's full."

Only then did I react and look back...

Exactly as he said, the water was overflowing from the cup.

He hastily rose to his feet, using his sleeve to wipe away the splatters on his clothing. "You devious girl, you lied to me about waiting for your beloved. As it turned out, he was our crown prince."

Even though he spoke casually, he was anything but ambiguous when it came to shaking out the water. I hurriedly backed up a few steps, afraid to get wet as I used one hand to shield the porcelain teapot. My smile was a bit strained. "I beg your pardon[2]."

But he only smiled at me.

What...

Did you want me to clean you up?

Hmph, you're not even my yifu.

Nongyu deserved the title of a man who had walked away from death[3] because his self-control was remarkable. He looked down and bustled about a bit before lifting his robes and retaking a seat. Then he rolled up a sleeve and pointed at one of the inner rooms.

"Your yifu has a teardrop-shaped mole."

"...."

"I heard he's a Fang Hua Beast?"

"...."

Old fellow, so what if he was? I'm not going to tell you anything.

He smiled, and grabbed my hand with his own.

"Younger Brother Shào." His tone was suddenly extravagantly tender, the tone carrying an upward tilt. There was a significant look in his eyes

that was rather flippant. "Did you forget? We became sworn brothers, so how could you bully your Brother Nong?"

Can I knock him out with the teapot...?

I really want to.

My fingers itched...I felt flustered holding myself back...but I endured and didn't look at him.

"Young Master Nong, regarding the promise to be sworn brothers—I remember Shao'er agreed to no such thing."

He only smiled, pausing for a bit before speaking. "Fortunately, you didn't agree back then, or else...I'd regreeeeet itttt." He intentionally drew out the last three words, grabbing my hands again as his eyelashes fluttered twice.

I stared at him.

His curved fingers gently stroked my palms, the movements slow and sluggish. Despite this, his grip was firm, preventing me from pulling away.

"What are you doing?" I blinked.

He looked at me with those sweeping lashes as his eyes widened slightly: part angry, part resentful. And then his hands grew more furtive

as he stroked mine, thoroughly delighted.

Talk about taking liberties...

This was taking liberties to a very high scale.

I looked around at the people who'd come with him. All of them had their heads bowed low in complete indifference.

Very good. Very big and powerful.

You think you can take liberties with a woman like this?

I was raised by Fang Hua. What kind of trials and hardships haven't I faced?

I clapped him on the shoulder, rolling my eyes. Then I pulled up my sleeves in a way that was three parts ruffian and seven parts elegant, and touched his face in front of all the spectators.

It was obvious to tell when he jerked, as if frightened.

I leaned over, thoroughly enjoying myself as I touched him again, and said extremely lewdly, "Even tofu can't compare to your little white cheeks."

He gave a start, and a mist rose in his pupils as he settled into a smile.

The entire room fell into silence. After a long while, he opened his mouth to speak.

"This has to count as skinship[4]."

What 'ship' nonsense, you think just touching each other is skinship? Then wouldn't the two guys in this house count as me keeping pets? I waved my hands, wanting to extricate myself, but he stuck to my face, clinging to them. There was a joking gleam in his eyes.

Curses...

Suddenly, the door to the inner room opened, and I used about a third of my internal energy to shake him off. I didn't even have time to catch in what elegant way he managed to topple to the ground.

Unobstructed...I charged into Fang Hua's room.

As it turned out, I came just in time to hear Han Zichuan speak. "...that's good too, then we'll return to the palace within the next few days."

Ah...

Go back to the palace?

I glanced downwards. Han Zichuan's hand rested on Fang Hua's long, slender one by his robes. The scene was particularly soft and graceful,

but also extremely offensive to the eye. I took a deep breath and opened my mouth.

Wait, something's not quite right...

Fang Hua actually agreed to go back to the palace with him?!

[1] mountain and river painting (山水) — shanshui, literally “mountain” and “water”. However, together shanshui is shorthand for 山水画 (shanshuihua), a genre of landscape painting in China. These paintings are known for their sweeping vistas and elegant brushwork, so Shao'er is basically saying Han Zichuan's eyebrows are like living art personified.

[2] I beg your pardon (对不住) — duibuzhu, basically “I'm sorry,” but in more polite, humble speech. It has the same meaning of “I've been unworthy and done your a disservice,” “excuse me/pardon me.”

[3] walked away from death (尸里出来) — shili chulai, “emerge from the corpse”, probably in regards to how boldly he'd faced the crown prince in the previous chapter. You definitely, certainly, must show respect to the imperial family, because they can end your life with literally one word (斩 [zhan], or “behead”). Nongyu escaped unscathed though, so it's like he became a dead man walking. Or something like that.

[4] skinship (肌肤之亲) — jifuzhiqin, “skin and muscle”, “of intimacy”, the intimacy of skin, especially between a man and a woman.

Chapter 26: Abandoned Child

Fang Hua actually agreed to go back to the imperial palace with Han Zichuan...

I stood dazed, but he just turned away.

"Brother Shao, go pack up the things in the room," Han Zichuan's eyes reflected warmth as they turned to me.

"Okay..."

Fang Hua didn't speak to stop me, or object to the familiarity in Han Zichuan's actions. On a typical day, even if a half-dead person was lying outside the bamboo forest yelling for help, he'd still be too lazy to save them. So why was he getting involved now?

Could it be because the person asking him was...Han Zichuan?

The room was very quiet and spacious. But now that both of them were standing, the space suddenly became narrow, and I felt like a unnecessary addition... There was a piece of my heart that felt as if it was being pulled taut, making it hard to breathe.

I couldn't say what kind of sensation this was. Besides being uncomfortable, I also felt a bitter sort of pain that was hard to describe. I turned around and inhaled deeply, my hands clenched into fists.

I should. Start packing.

I didn't know how long this trip to the palace would take. I'd have to pack my two sets of robes (the ones I took turns washing), and yifu's usual collection of wonder pills, and...

My gaze swept the corners of the room.

Yifu didn't eat human food, so I should prepare something fresh for him on the road, pick something that was juicy and sweet...

"Shao'er." Fang Hua took my sleeve and held me in place, speaking softly. "It's Zichuan and I that are going to the palace, do you understand?"

They're not taking me...?

I trembled, turning around to look at Han Zichuan.

"Why leave her alone in the house?" Han Zichuan seemed to be very surprised. His eyes blinked, and he gave an uncertain glance in Fang Hua's direction. The two of them stared at each other for a while before he tacitly complied. Nothing more was said on the matter.

"I'll go put things in order so you prepare the carriage, and we'll leave in a bit." Fang Hua finished, before closing the door and leaving. A splash of sunlight illuminate his form outside the rooms, making his figure hazy

and indistinct.

There was something in my heart...

...slowing sinking towards the bottom.

"Brother Shao." A pair of hands lightly rested on my shoulders. Han Zichuan drew closer and smiled. "This is just how Fang Hua is. When he decides on something, nothing can change his mind."

"But you somehow convinced him to go to the palace to cure your father, didn't you?"

His smile grew gloomy, but he didn't reply, only saying in a soft tone, "I'll come visit you often."

What a joke...

Whether or not you visit has nothing to do with me.

The only person I want is yifu.

I pushed him aside and rushed out, leaving him standing in place. I didn't linger to see his expression, because if I did...everything might have had a different result.

I held back the anger in my heart and returned to my room. I turned the

wardrobe upside down to collect an armful of clothing, and went to look for Fang Hua, room by room.

He was standing by the window in the study, lost in thought. A cloth covered the low table, and on it were two very plain sets of robes. He didn't see to care much when he saw me, but only started packing away the books in his arms.

"Yifu, allow me to do these."

"I won't trouble you." His refusal was clean and final.

My emotions left me unable to utter a word, and I stood on one side, at a loss. I sadly went to his side and sprawled on the table, indignantly watching as he stuffed bottles and jars into the bag...those long, slender fingers lovingly caressing each one.

A few of the objects inside were his favorites, but there was nothing that belonged to me...

I pulled out a book, meaning to throw it away, but held myself back. I glanced at him. While he wasn't paying attention, I took the chance to stuff one of my robes into his bundle.

"Why are you bothering to do this...?" he sighed. His eyes raised to look at me, chilly as moonlight like always. His hands pressed down against mine and he grabbed the robes, mercilessly hauling it back out.

"Yifu..."

I stubbornly grabbed the robes, as if my only hope laid in snatching it back. Although Fang Hua never said it, I knew he held tender affections for me. After living together for so many years, we were used to each other's presence.

But why didn't he want me now?

He was going to accompany Han Zichuan to the palace...

He was going to leave me all alone in this house.

Did he really not need me anymore?

There were countless things I still hadn't thought over thoroughly, but I still had no self-confidence. He slowly tugged away the robes I was trying to hold in place. My heart ached with a burning pain.

Under his continued scrutiny, I grew more and more unsure of myself. A person had no energy to rebel against that firm gaze. His inflexibility quelled any attempts to stuff in my things. The robes were taken out, and the traveling bag secured. Throughout it all, he remained calm and expressionless. Even his eyes betrayed no emotions.

I'd long abandoned the idea of figuring everything out. I only felt that he was leaving me in very sore straits.

"Yifu..." I clutched at Fang Hua's arm, my head bowed. "I just want to ask

you one thing."

"Speak."

"Have you already decided to abandon Shao'er?"

He remained silent, not speaking a word. My grip loosened, and I released his sleeves.

"Shao'er understands." At this moment, my heart started aching again. It felt as if something was caught in my chest, as if just speaking would make my cry.

"Shao'er, no...you don't understand."

He gave me a concentrated look, eyes flooded with a soft light. "You've grown up now. You can't always be like a child and follow your yifu around. Your internal energy isn't bad, and you have a good grasp of poisons." He slowly scooped up my hands, patting them a few times.

Those eyebrows rose with his smile as he tried to soothe me. "You've always listened to what I said. Yifu hopes that after you leave me, you'll make a good name for yourself living in the jianghu[1]."

Muttering to himself, his eyes slowly looked over me. "The jianghu is free and unfettered, leisurely and carefree. It's much more fun than the imperial palace."

He stood before me now, nothing like the him of the past, speaking to me in such an earnest, fatherly tone.

He was my yifu...my foster father.

After all these years, I'd grown up. But he still looked as same as the day he picked me up from the rundown temple. The Heavens looked favorably upon him, and the passing years did nothing to leave a mark on his face...

Standing together now, we looked about the same age.

And yet, his heart was as hard as ever.

He said the jianghu was better than the palace, but he—but he knew—exactly how I felt.

The jianghu of a single person isn't a jianghu at all.

Stricken, I stood dazed for a while.

"It's settled. I'll cure Han Zichuan's father's illness and then return here," he smiled gently at me.

"Shao'er...will..." I turned my head away, half-facing him. My sentence came word by word. "...wait here for you."

A gust of wind blew in from the window. He kept his smile. The dark red mole beneath his eye resembled a teardrop.

Osmanthus drifted in on the breeze to rest against his shoulder, carrying with it a sweet-smelling fragrance. I started to raise my hand and brush it off, but he moved away from me. Awkwardly, my hand withdrew, and I lowered my eyes in disappointment.

I kept feeling that after he entered the palace, he might not come back...

[1] jianghu (江湖) —“rivers and lakes”—but that’s the literal definition. Of course we’re talking about the wide, wide world and all corners of the country, especially the *cough* lawless areas that heroes travel to in wuxia/xianxia series. Battles! Treasure! Adventure! Beautiful wo–well, beautiful men for Shao’er, I guess~

Chapter 27: Entering the Palace

Someone knocked lightly against the door.

I hurriedly turned away, rubbing my face with my sleeves.

Nongyu leaned against the doorframe outside, looking at me. His tone was flippant. "The carriage is already outside with the crown prince waiting in it. When will the beautiful person join him?"

Fang Hua wasn't angry, but swept over him with a light gaze. "Everything's been packed up. I'll go now."

"Yifu..." I tugged at his sleeve, extremely reluctant.

He released himself to scoop up the bundle on the table and gently stepped outside.

From within the carriage, Han Zichuan was just raising the screen when he spotted me. He gave me a long gaze, his eyes filled with a reluctance to part and another indescribable, indistinct emotion.

"You have to take care of m-my yifu, you hear me?" I gave him a ferocious stare.

He only smiled at me.

My eyes swept over, and settled on Fang Hua again with a tangled expression. He seemed to pause, eyes reluctantly looking over the residence as if he didn't want to leave. Yet he entered the carriage without glancing my way.

"We'll be taking our leave," Nongyu sat astride his horse, looking at me thoughtfully. Then he whipped the animal and galloped off in a cloud of dust.

I forced back the tears threatening to leak from my eyes. I wanted to ask yifu to stay behind, but I could only watch helplessly as the carriage vanished into the distance.

From start to finish...

Fang Hua hadn't spared me a single look.

Neither did he leave me any silver.

I took a long breath, covered in dust as I returned to the house. Plopping on a chair, I scooped up a cup from the table I poured myself some water that I downed it in one gulp. My heart was filled with frustration.

But at the same time, I wanted to laugh.

It was fine if I didn't have silver. Fortunately, I'd buried a sizable secret

stash of money that could finally come in handy.

This Fang Hua.

He thought I'd meekly listen to his words?

What a joke...

The greatest joke in the Heavens! I stuck a hand on my waist and laughed out loud, laughing until I felt a bitter pain.

Fang Hua definitely foresaw that I'd secretly follow after them if he left me any silver. Han Zichuan must have used some way to convince him to go to the palace so obediently.

He was already a handful to deal with here here. How could he follow Han Zichuan so willingly to court?

Even though I had no idea what the palace was like, I'd heard enough from the storytellers on my trips to the marketplace. The current old man emperor was immoderately licentious, frequently raising taxes that forced the people into poverty. This I knew very well. I remember when I was a beggar, it was even common to see people eating other people.

I poured myself more water while thinking things over.

One hand rested on my forehead, my eyebrows knitted, fingers poking my skin...

Truthfully speaking, the emperor rarely came to court in recent years. The affairs of the country were in the hands of the ministers, and the lives of the common people had improved day by day. If I hadn't met Nongyu last time, I wouldn't have known that someone had poisoned the emperor, even though this was just a conclusion drawn from a few isolated words and phrases. But I think...it was about eight or nine-tenths of the truth.

From my perspective, it'd be better if this stupid emperor died. Even if he didn't, there'd be people who wanted him dead. Otherwise, where would we get people braving the dangers of Jiuzu[1] to harm him with poison?

Since this palace had someone poison the emperor with none the wiser, it had to be a person with extraordinary abilities. Now that Fang Hua was going to save him, things would bode ill for him[2]. Moreover, the imperial harem was filled with so many beautiful women living by themselves.

Who knew how much chaos he would incite as soon as he entered the palace? What would the imperial concubines think of him?

Hnn.

You don't want me to go?

Not possible!

Old geezer, I've got plenty of money.

I suppress a stomach full of anger as I started digging in the dirt...piling up layers and layers of paper money and shiny gold leaves, and grinned from the corners of my mouth.

In these days, everything was easier if you had money.

But...

I soon discovered I was mistaken.

It took around a dozen days of thoughtful effort to make it to the palace gates.

I changed into a set of clean robes and assumed the air of a clever, lovely girl to hand over my silver. Originally I planned to behave myself and get a job as a servant girl. But the eunuch in charge practically salivated with greed. His oily hands ran over and over my gold leaves, feeling especially pleased. In the end, he fixed his eyes to stare at me, before circling around a few times to inspect me up and down. His eyes rolled around in circles before he spoke in a shrill and piercing voice.

"Girl, why don't you wait a few more days. They're selecting court ladies then, and you have the makings of an imperial concubine."

The old man emperor was already confined to bed, who said he's gonna pick any court ladies. If I entered the palace as a court lady and the emperor died, wouldn't I be forced into seclusion as a widowed nun?

Pah!

That old lecher sure had a well-deserved reputation with officials like these...even a castrated eunuch was still so obscene.

And thus.

I looked at the aging face leaning my way, and knocked him senseless with a wave of my sleeve. Then I forcefully wrested away the gold leaves in his hands and snatched back the paper money from his robes.

I returned to my inn and gave a small sigh to the reflection in the mirror.

There was something about beautiful women suffering unhappy fates. My eyebrows looked like eyebrows, my eyes looked like eyes...but both were extremely attractive. Who knew what kind of trouble I'd have if I entered the palace like this. It'd be better to ruin my looks.

Thus, I pinched some medicinal powder and casually smeared it over myself. It itched and burned and made my skin feel numb.

I lied on the bed, tossing and turning before I fell asleep. The next day, my face had turned swollen.

I went back to the palace gates again. Before I could see the eunuch in charge...I was laughed away by the guards...

All of them kept saying, if you look like this, we're afraid you'll scare the emperor!

So I can't be beautiful or ugly.

What do you want me to do?

In a fit of rage, I poisoned them all again. Originally, I wanted to walk off with their money as well. But I happened to see the open palace gates in the distance...and the group of guards patrolling the entrance.

I held myself back, and returned to the inn. In my room I paced back and forth, extremely anxious.

To tell you the truth, it was easy for me to poison people, and I knew a bit about saving them too...but I'd never learned the art of changing my appearance. Disheartened, I sat down and stared at my reflection in the mirror, thinking long and hard for over half the day.

Suddenly, I gave a start, blinking.

From the depths of my robes I took out a few bottles, shaking out a few samples of medicinal powders. After applying them for three days, there was finally some effect.

At last, my face looked a little more ordinary.

It was just that...

The powders I'd dissolved in water to form my mask looked a little unnatural on my face. It always felt a little stiff when I tried to talk or smile...

But these looks finally got me into the imperial palace.

Honestly speaking, the people in the imperial court had really seen much of the world. They didn't budge at small change, but demanded piles and piles of paper money instead.

This was all to get a few connections up and down the chain of hierarchy... In this way I spent all the money I'd grubbed from Nongyu.

I hid a bitter heart as I gazed at the eunuch in charge, making marks with his brush as he flipped through a record book. He suddenly raised his head and looked back, smiling as he muttered, "You said you know a bit about medicine?"

I lowered my head and obediently replied. "Yes."

"Perfect. These few days a person of indeterminate position has been arranged to cure His Majesty's illness. The imperial physicians just happen to be extremely short of hands. How about you go with them?"

Ah...

Hey, a chance!

[1] Jiuzu (九族) — “nine degrees of kindred”, or the “nine generations,” shorthand for a punishment in which one’s great-great-great grandfather to one’s great-great-great grandson, or 4 generations of one’s paternal relations + 3 generations of one’s maternal relations + 2 generations of one’s wife’s relations...were all executed as punishment for a crime. Considering how much ancient Chinese valued family ties/names/ancestors, this was a fearful punishment, usually reserved for the most serious crimes (especially those against the imperial family)!

[2] bode ill for him (凶多吉少) — xiongduo jishao, or “be fraught with grim possibilities”, have “more inauspicious/ominous” things and “less auspicious/lucky” things.

Chapter 28: Meeting an Old Friend

Three days later.

"Use this formula to simmer these medicines, the imperial physician's waiting impatiently," a 13 to 14 year old eunuch hailed me with his hand.

"Yes."

I pinched the paper between my fingers and gave it a glance. The written words resembled flying dragons and dancing phoenixes. Tian Shan Mountain Snow Lotus, Thousand-Year Ginseng...though the ingredients for the pill were incomparably rare, their effects were rather ordinary.

"Hey...where are you going?" the young eunuch stopped me with an arm.

I raised my eyes and lazily replied, "Didn't you tell me to boil some medicine?"

"Wrong, wrong!" he stomped his foot, rapping me with one finger. "The imperial physicians each take turns serving in the palace. Understand?"

I was clueless.

"Let me put it this way," he looked around, then drew close to speak in a soft voice. "Today's physician is really hard to please. He doesn't want any of his prescriptions to be made in the pill room furnace because he has to personally dictate the times and temperatures for the fire. So for this pill, we have to go to his place and have him watch us make it. Only then can we give it to the master."

How ludicrous.

This wasn't something for the emperor, so was there a need to go to such lengths?

"Why aren't you hurrying up...what are you spacing out for?" he gave me a disdainful glance. "Aish, forget it...a newbie girl like you definitely doesn't understand palace rules. Come on, I'll show you the way so you can learn a little something. Gong gong's[1] got lots of things to take care of, so I'll only teach you once."

"Thank you, gong gong." I lowered my head, gathered my ingredients, and straightened. The whole way I followed him left and right, he swished his robes with a haughty air.

Can someone explain to me what this eunuch was acting so arrogantly about to my face....?

Did he think that if I got annoyed enough to poison him, he'd get a new life after being dead and turn into a man?

Ah. Pah!

He suddenly came to a stop and turned around to look at me. "What about you chattering about behind my back?"

I had a sudden moment of panic.

"To answer gong gong's question, I was saying..." My thoughts were in a knot before I calmed myself down. Suddenly, a fresh scent floated over on the air, and I assumed a posture of sniffing for something. "It's smells very nice inside this courtyard."

"You haven't experienced much," he backed up a few steps, scooping up his sleeves to point somewhere to my left. "Do you see over there? There's a pond full of blooming red lotuses, of course it'll smell nice."

"Is this the season for red lotuses to bloom?" I was unconvinced. I counted off with my fingers, wondering if I'd remember the time wrong...

"It's not," his reply was concise and to the point. A glance swept my way, before he added, "Two days after the crown prince brought back some beautiful stranger, all the flowers bloomed in this pond."

Tsk. Tsk, tsk.

No wonder, then. Looks like our Fang Hua had some skills. Beautiful, it really was beautiful... Every flower a flower, each petal a petal.

I placed the ingredients for the medicine aside, and leaned against the

railings to look down below. A mist hung over the entire pond, and all the lotuses were half-opened, as if shy.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?!"

Fang Hua liked to eat lotuses, but the ones by our house were usually pure white like snow. I'd never seen such a warm, stunning shade of red...

I have to pick one so yifu can taste it.

"Gong gong, you go on first," I was sprawled on the ground, hand reaching out beyond the banisters. "I'll find you after I take one."

He grew nervous, looking around anxiously. Utterly discomfited, he grabbed at my sleeves as if his life depended on it. "You can't, you can't pick it...hurry up and stand up."

Ah...

You can't pick it.

I already plucked one...and it was gorgeous, with a huge stem.

"The flowers in the palace aren't something you can just take so casually! If you do that, then..." he leaned in, making a slicing motion at his throat as he spoke in a very small voice. Then he back up quite a few steps with an expression that clearly said the rest was up to me.

"What...they'll behead people? Curses, why didn't you say anything earlier, gong gong?!" I was shocked.

"Hush, what are you making a fuss for? Lower your voice," the little eunuch covered my mouth with a hand.

Suddenly, the sound of rapid footsteps came rushing from the shrubbery. I looked at him...and he blinked, before releasing me.

Panicking, I hurriedly stuffed the fresh lotus inside my robes. It felt a little cold...I shook myself a few times and my neck shrank back, goosebumps showing on my skin.

The little eunuch had a good heart, and hastily bent over to collect the medicinal ingredients, placing them into my hands. He pulled me over to stand by him and squeezed my hand, speaking in a low voice. "Be mindful and follow what gong gong does. Don't give yourself away."

I gave him a dumbfounded look, but when our gazes met, there was an implicit understanding.

The tree branches were brushed aside, and a bright yellow robe appeared before our eyes. Since my gaze was lowered, I didn't dare to see who it was. The little eunuch carefully tugged at me, and I blindly copied his kowtow.

He said your servant greets His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, and I was filled with a sense of disaster as if thunder was striking my head.

No way...

It was just a flower, is it really worth...the attention of such an important person?

I kept kneeling, timid.

Next, I felt someone sweeping their gaze over me before resting on something else.

I lifted my eyes and snuck a peek.

Han Zichuan was neatly attired as a crown prince, a string of pearls hanging from the top of his headpiece. His court dress was embroidered with five dragons, his waist belt ornamented with fine jade, his comportment filled with the air of an aristocrat. It made him even more handsome, if not for the disappointment gracing his face. He seemed to be searching for something.

"Your highness, why did you suddenly run so quickly?" a court lady emerged from the bushes, wiping away her sweat. "The ministers are still waiting for you on the other side."

His sigh was especially melodious, making him all the more striking.

"Maybe I heard wrong. How could that person be in the palace?" There was a gloomy look in his eyes as he turned. "Let's go."

That was a close call...

I watched his retreating form, my hands shaking so much I couldn't even stand.

"Luckily, we weren't discovered. Though it's a small matter if you die, I'd still be tied to a plank and beaten." the young eunuch's face was ghastly pale as he helped me up.

This not-boy not-girl sure knew how to say unpleasant things.

He gave me the cold shoulder for the whole trip as he led me to the wing of a residence. From a very far distance, I could already smell the dense, thick scent of medicine.

The door to the house was softly pushed open, and a wave of heat emerged.

Two rows of pots were currently roasting over fires, tended to by fourteen servants squatting on the ground, fanning the flames.

It was a grand sight...

The lighting was a bit dim indoors, with only a single stream of sunshine coming through the windows. There was a person overseeing the group while reading a volume in his hands. Occasionally, he'd fan himself, seeming leisurely and carefree.

The young eunuch pushed me forward and gave me a Look.

Instead, I stood stunned, surveying the person before me. His finger was slender and attractive, as well as a little familiar.

"Lord Nong, your servant has brought over the medicine you requested," the eunuch said, pinching the side of my waist.

"Ow," I blurted. But realizing this wasn't the time, I hurriedly shut my mouth, eyes blinking.

He turned around, raising his eyebrows as if he wanted to ascertain something from my face. His tone was light as he spoke. "Put the ingredients into the fifteenth pot and heat it over a slow fire."

"Yes, sire."

I backed out with my body bent over.

But as soon as I turned around, I was gritting my teeth. How unlucky...I ran into all the people I didn't want to see.

This hateful Nongyu, why did he do things so complicatedly...it was just boiling some medicine, so why did it have to be pot number 15? I dumped everything inside, splashing myself slightly with water.

Huh...

The flavor tasted a little different.

Maybe they added things in.

I used a sleeve to wipe away the water on my face and sniffed it, before I smiled.

This was pretty smart. Boiling Tian Shan Snow Lotus only fortified the body, but adding in extracts from the Dew of One Hundred Blossoms Pill gave it an extra effect of dispelling poisons.

Looks like...

He knew a few tricks of the trade.

Squatting on the ground, I felt a bit bored as I waved my fan back and forth, watching the fire.

I looked both ways before leaning closer to the fire to warm my clothing. The lotus I'd stuffed inside before had been cold and wet, enough to soak my inner robes and make me uncomfortable.

I pinched the front of my clothes and shook it out a few times.

Then my hand leisurely snaked into and felt around for a bit before my expression changed. My hand slipped out...I didn't know when, but the lotus inside my robes had lost all its petals, which had scattered over my

hands.

What a pity...

And I'd wanted to bring it to yifu.

"What are you doing? Pay more attention." the person next to me gave a shove.

"Yes," I sucked in a breath and hastily hid the remains in my robes. There was a cold sensation behind my back, as if someone was staring my way. The fire was blazing hot, and I grew thoughtful as I fanned it back and forth, trying to steal a peek.

Strange.

Everyone was minding their own business...

Could it be that I was hallucinating?

"All right, it's about time. Leave the rest to me to finish." A clear, refreshing voice rose about the heat in the room, making everyone who heard it feel extremely comfortable.

Nongyu lowered his book with a smile, and waved his hand. The servants all lowered their heads and started trailing out. I copied them.

Before I reached the door, though...

A pair of boots appeared below my eyes, and its owner noiselessly blocked the exit.

"You..."

Nongyu leaned in, eyes curved into a smile as he spoke softly.

"...stay here."

[1] Gong gong (公公) —title used by eunuchs to refer to themselves in third person.

Chapter 29: Legendary Face-Changing Expert (Part 1)

I hid my face.

A light laugh drifted over, and a hand appeared before me as a shadow fell across my form. I jerked and wanted to run, but there was no way out.

"What are you hiding for...?" Nongyu's elbow was propped up against the door behind me, dashingy posing as he spoke softly. "Carry over the pills to me."

...who does he think he's ordering around?

My eyes darted around the room.

"What are you goggling at? There's just the two of us here, and this medicine has to be secretly delivered to the noble consort[1]. Don't tell me you expect me to do it personally?"

I thought he'd seen through me.

So it looked like he just wanted me to deliver some pills.

Say it earlier so I won't get nervous for nothing!

I turned sideways, bending down to duck beneath his arms and respectfully pour the pills into a bowl. It was easier to work while

kneeling on the ground, and I held the medicine with both hands as I walked towards him. He didn't say a word, but opened the doors to lead the way.

Sunlight splashed against him, illuminating the tall and graceful form. He half-turned his head to look at me out of the corner of his eye, and it looked as if he was smiling.

Maybe I'm overthinking, but he kept reminding me of a no-good weasel.

He selected a different covered corridor with exquisite, complicated turns. Water lapped at us from both sides, and lotuses grew in their depths.

No wonder this was the imperial palace...everywhere looked like something out of a beautiful painting. And no wonder Fang Hua would agree to come, when the flowers here outnumbered the ones outside by multiples. Even if he ate as much as he wanted, he'd still have enough meals to last him seven lifetimes.

"Why haven't I seen you before? Are you new?" he turned his body towards me with a slow grin.

The imperial physician Nongyu took liberties with ladies of respectable families in the outside world...would he really pay attention to every single servant girl?

But my hands were figuratively tied, so I bowed.

"Yes, sire. This one was brought in a few days ago. Gong gong said that the imperial physicians needed more hands."

He nodded, casually shaking out his robes as he casually asked, "How many people are in your family?"

"My mother, my younger brother, and an elder over 80 years old," I recited back.

In any case...in any case, it was all true.

He raised his eyebrows with a veiled smile, intently focused on me as if he was considering something. It made a person...apprehensive.

A patrol group passed by us, and he took a deep breath. After the armed guards were out of sight, he grabbed my hand. My eyes widened, and I caught a glance of his own smiling ones as he led me around a corner. Immediately afterwards, my body was pressed against a cool stone wall.

"You still like to tell such blatant lies..." his body pressed forwards, and he muttered in a low tone. "Younger Sister Shào..."

Rage!

You stupid pill-purchasing physician, you knew who I was but pretended not to! I was forced to be the idiot who played along...nnngh...

With an earnest look, he covered my mouth with his hand and murmured, "Don't make sudden noises and I'll let you go. Otherwise, if you attract the attention of the guards, I won't protect you."

I narrowed my eyes, nodding repeatedly. He smiled but didn't release me.

In fact, he got even closer, fully giving me the force of his tender gaze, eyelashes quivering as his breaths tickled my face. While it itched, the feeling also made me sweat a little nervously. He slowly lowered his head and stroked my cheek with one finger.

"So obedient..." the rest of his oily words dissolved with a sigh into the air.

My eyes grew wider than ever, and it felt like I was suffocating. All I could see was his handsome-looking face and those eyes curving into a smile. My heartbeats pounded like a drum, as if it was trying to jump out of my throat.

His face drew closer to mine before he pressed his lips against his hand there, leaving a mark. My body stiffened, and I flushed, at a loss for what to do.

This was an alcove along the corridor, and there was no place for me to hide. Thick walls encircled me on both sides with the pond just beyond. The budding lotuses floated on the water, right by our forms...

Their delicate fragrance assailed the nose and hovered in the air about us. It was a very romantic scene[2].

Only I didn't feel this way at all. Not to mention, the other person was the wrong guy.

My teeth flashed.

"Alas...you actually bit me." he hastily withdrew his hand to examine it carefully. Still, he had a smile when he looked at me again. "You should know there's a lot of women in the world who adore me—Nongyu."

I held back, my face very red, and took a deep breath.

"Like I care about that! If you get fresh with me again..." I fumbled about before pulling out a packet of powder. "Be careful my poison doesn't leave you an eternal bachelor[3]!"

He completely ignored the powder to focus on my chest instead, amused. "You hid so much stuff in there, but you're still kind of flat...that's rather worrying."

The sagely Nongyu I remembered first meeting, was this really the same person...?

The bantering tone hadn't changed, but he seemed to have grown fonder of teasing others. I really wanted to shut him up, but...

Personal preferences aside, there was something important I didn't understand.

"How did you guess it was me...did my disguise fail so hard?" I touched my face, uncertain. The layers of the mask were still there, so I shouldn't have been easily exposed.

"Do you want to know? It's actually very simple." He smiled lightly, bending down. Those refined eyebrows were long and slender, giving him a relaxed and cheerful expression. "I'm a face-changing expert."

Face-changing expert?

A guy like him...

I was too late to hide the expression of ridicule on my face.

Nongyu took back his unrestrained, frivolous manners, and said seriously, "Come with me." So saying, he grabbed my hand and pulled me along.

"But this medicine..." I pointed at the package on the ground.

"There'll be someone to take it away, don't bother."

Huh...

He actually rolled his eyes at me, t-t-this...I'm so mad! I could actually throw up.

I don't know how many turns we made before we reached a house. Nongyu shut the door behind us as we entered.

"What's the point of shutting the door up so tightly?"

"Of course...it's so..." His leisurely voice followed the slow lift of his head, while I stood there in the breeze, puzzled. The corners of his eyes rose, and his face had the smug look of someone used to taking liberties. "We can work together to deceive everyone else."

I gave him a blank look, completely ill at ease. Plopping onto a chair, I found a bronze mirror to examine my fake face.

There was nothing enticing about this face at all...

Looks like Nongyu was an exceptional case, not even letting a vile old skinbag like this go. Truthfully speaking, I felt sorry for the old emperor.

He was sick enough to be confined to bed, away from all the beautiful sights of the inner court. Meanwhile this imperial physician could wander about the place as he'd liked. Even if he stirred up a big fuss, he could abort the situation quite easily, leaving no one the wiser.

"What are you whispering about in the corner?" His hand rested against the table as he leaned down, index finger picking at my face. The neatly trimmed nail brushed past my skin as his mouth creased into a smile.

"Younger Sister Shào..."

"What are you babbling about, trying to call back the dead?" I beat him off.

"Your poison skills are superior to mine, and your medical skills might reach my level before long but...it looks like your face-changing skills aren't much after all."

He was looking down on me.

My rebuttal faded as I saw my reflection in the mirror. I looked back and forth a few times, before falling into silence.

"Yifu never taught me how to change my appearance."

He smiled, and dug off a piece of skin from my face to take an experimental sniff. "This is the first time I, Nongyu, have seen anyone use poisonous powders to change their looks...Younger Sister Shào, you have some guts."

"I was raised by Fang Hua. Do you think I fear poisons?"

"That makes sense," he turned and took out a light green bottle from a side drawer. Pulling out the stopper, he gave a sniff before pouring some of its contents into his palm, eyes laughing. "Come and tilt your face towards me, be good."

"Haven't I been facing you the entire time...hmph..."

A fragrant aroma drifted from his palm, and some sort of liquidy, oily plaster was applied to my face. It felt like he was smearing paint over a wall... The strong force he was using gradually lessened as he asked, "Hn? Comfortable?"

"It's all right."

He smiled again.

I caught the hand that wanted to drift down to my neck and collar, and spoke tightly, "You haven't done the bottom half of my face yet."

"Excuse my lack of manners," he lightly searched my face, as if looking for something. Then he made a polite gesturing motion to the side. "There's water over there to wash off your face. You'll be recognized sooner or later by the crown prince and your yifu like this."

"First I get smeared with weird stuff, then I have to wash my face. What exactly are you playing at?"

"It's very simple," He took up his sleeves and spoke in a leisurely tone. "I'm going to make you another face."

[1] noble consort (贵妃) — guifei, depends on dynasty, but this is one of the highest (if not the highest) level of imperial concubines. Of course,

the one on top is the empress. [2] romantic scene (风花雪月) —feng hua xue yue, or “wind, flowers, snow, moon”, term originally used for certain types of works, and later referring to sentimental writings in general. Think along the lines of...cliché shoujo scenes or similar. [3] eternal bachelor (无妻无儿) —wuqi wuer, “without a wife, without a son,” I took a bit of creative liberties here, hehe.

Chapter 29: Legendary Face-Changing Expert (Part 2)

Ah...

Not bad, I could agree to that. I nodded and smiled before turning with an exclamation of surprise.

"Where's the water..."

"The water's in the copper basin."

"Then where's the copper basin?"

"Walk forward seven to eight steps. There's a copper basin on the rack with some cold water inside. The hot water pail and ladle is on the ground...as for a face towel, you can use your sleeves for now." His eyes were gleaming, but their gaze was gentle and soft, his voice unhurried. "Understand?"

I rolled up my sleeves and stuck a pinkie in my ear. But then he raised a foot and gave me a light kick. "If you know, then why aren't you hurrying over?"

Nice guy, you sure change moods fast.

I peered into the basin and had a sudden bout of laziness. I didn't feel like adding any hot water, so I just leaned over and splashed my face, shaking my head a few times. This basically made me clean...but excess

water was still trailing down from my hair, so I quickly rubbed it dry with my sleeves.

When I raised my head, I saw Nongyu staring at me blankly.

"What?"

He sucked in his lips and pursed them, as if just regaining his senses. But it seemed he was resisting the urge to smile with great difficulty. "To sink to this level, Younger Sister Shào has already amazed me. Your movements are so violent, and yet you treat it as a small trifle. Such behavior is worthy of acclaim." He clasped his hands in a bow, and refused to meet my eyes.

How contemptuous.

Nothing but bare disdain...

I smacked the table and gave him a glare as I sat in my seat.

"Come and pick one." His sleeves whisked over the table. I swept over the surface with a careless gaze, but was instantly transfixed.

There was a white jade vessel sitting on the table, within which were suspended various skin masks as thin as cicada wings...the water wafted with the scent of sandalwood as it quivered.

He lifted his gaze to look at me. "Let's use this one." So speaking, he

deftly lifted out a mask from the very bottom, and pressed it against my face.

"Hey...you, I didn't even pick yet."

A mild tone rose from somewhere above me. "These are my masks. You pick what you want, I give what I want...if you pick something I refuse to give, then you couldn't do anything about it anyways."

Abominable.

This guy was really abominable!

"Don't move around. Each mask is as precious as gold," he stuck his finger around my eyebrows and pressed down a few times, slowly sliding it down...after stroking seven or eight places, his eyes crinkled and he gave a cheerful laugh. "It's done."

I felt an ominous premonition and stole a look at him. Turning away, I furtively touched my face. The surface was pretty slippery, and thin enough that it felt like I was rubbing my own skin. My anxiety slowly calmed down.

He embraced me from behind, hands slowly reaching upwards. "There's one more thing that we need to change."

He rested a finger above the front button of my collar.

Exactly what did he plan to do...?

Seeing his face get increasingly closer, my expression turned serious.

From the depths of my sleeves, I grabbed some packets of powder. There was still time to throw them...

His hands clamped around my wrists, preventing me from moving within his embrace.

"Do you want to poison me again?"

"A well-read sage of the Confucian classics would never be as rude as you."

"I'm only like that with outsiders, but I don't need to be with you." He smiled and used a finger to prop up my face. "Moreover...I usually read medical books."

His hand moved lower, brushing against the top button of my collar with a smile that wasn't quite a smile.

"What are you doing..."

"Don't misunderstand, I said there's one more thing you have to change." He pressed closer and asked, "Do you know what it is?"

I lowered my head, silently looking...

The place where he'd rested his hand was very particular...a little bit lower and he'd be a shameless rogue; a little higher and he'd be considered a tease.

"You're too artistic with your hand placement. Forgive me for being dull, but I really don't understand."

He laughed, lifting his hand to brush a slender finger past my throat and chin. His face drew by my side, the eyelashes drooping as he spoke softly in my ear. "Your voice..."

"Voice?"

"You asked me why I could recognize you even after you changed your looks. Though I'm a face-changing expert who can tell with a glance, those people familiar with you will be able to guess just from listening to you talk." He turned away, taking a small square box off a rack. From its depth, he took out a round, black pill and held it in his hand. "So...eat this."

I looked at him sideways.

You think I'd eat it...just because you said so?

Who knew if it was poisoned?

"Do you not trust me? Or are you just afraid of my poisons?"

"I, Shao Hua, have made plenty of my own poisons. Like I'd be scared of you trifling imperial physician!"

"So Shào Yu really was a lie you made up to fool me." He smiled slightly, and said mildly, "...the person vanished without a trace, the waters flow hollowly on. The beautiful spring does not linger for youth, and regrets exist on without ceasing." His gaze was brilliant as he stared fixedly at me. "Shao Hua is as beautiful as that spring, what a good name[1]."

He really had a way with words.

His tone of speech even resembled those melancholy, cast-aside lovestruck princes. I was on the verge of paying respects to his skills.

Nongyu's eyes overflowed with a soft and gentle warmth, and he rolled up his sleeves, preparing to speak again. I hurriedly twisted around to muffle him with one hand, tossing the pill in my mouth with another as I swallowed.

Air rushed through my entire body and up towards my throat. It felt both numb and itchy...as if countless ants were crawling around inside.

Shoot, what kind of pill was this?

I clutched my throat, looking around until I spotted a table. Pouring myself a cup of water, I downed it in one gulp, allowing its coolness to seep down. It was much more comfortable after that.

"What kind of pill is this?! It's even hard to talk, do you want me to become a mute?" I frowned as I blurted out my grievance.

A slightly clear and melodious voice filled the room...

I stood stunned.

"Isn't this good? Now even the crown prince won't recognize you." He rested his hands behind his back, feeling extremely self-satisfied.

Che, Han Zichuan hadn't recognized me back then either.

My hands felt around my throat, feeling extremely astonished. I tested my voice a few more times. As before, it had the crystal clear tones of a child.

"Go tidy up your things a bit, you'll be moving to another wing today."

"Why?" The place I lived at now wasn't half-bad.

"Your yifu has been in the palace for a while, but he's taciturn and never goes out. The court ladies and eunuchs in charge of serving him all live in dread because none of them know what he likes. Each day he doesn't treat the emperor's illness is one more day that makes me anxious." He grasped my hand. "Fang Hua didn't want you to come, yet here you are. Since things are like this, why don't you live with him? If you don't reveal yourself, I won't expose you either, how about it?"

I gave him an empty look.

His eyes shone with sincerity and a certain eagerness.

"I don't want to..." I said flatly, wearing an extremely reluctant face. "But in light of the fact that you saved me...I'll grudgingly agree."

His eyes crinkled into a very pleased smile, and he pulled my wrist to lead me outside. The entire way, he dragged me along as my face kept its stiff expression, though I resisted an urge to smile.

Inside, I was thoroughly delighted...

To the Heavens above, I'll burn some incense for you when I get back.

Finally I can see yifu and even live with him in the same room...if that was the case, didn't it mean that at night...

Nongyu slowed down, turning around to look at me. "Are you so happy because you're going to see your yifu soon?"

"No, originally I wanted to enter the palace and fool around...but now you're making me work for you." My expression was tragic and sorrowful.

He placed a hand comfortingly on my shoulders, patting me a few times.

"I heard the servants say he's hard to serve, so I'll have to trouble you for these few days. His monthly allowances are much higher than the imperial physicians', but I'll give you some extra to add on later."

I firmly suppressed the rising joy in my heart, instead exhaling an irritated breath as my gaze clouded over. My face reddened in stubborn silence, while his was filled with apology as he continued to lead me in silence.

Around the length of time it took for half an incense stick to burn, we came before a lacquered door, painted vermillion red.

"Imperial Physician Nong," Two or three court ladies hurriedly knelt on the ground as he approached.

He nodded and stopped walking.

"Why aren't you inside doing your jobs?"

The court ladies exchanged glances, as if reluctant to disclose an awkward topic. The door was slightly ajar, and opened with a single push.

I stood behind Nongyu as we entered and saw a figure within the rooms. Pitch-black hair covered his shoulders, and a ray of light illuminated his whole body. Under the serenity of the scene, Fang Hua's beauty shone in brilliant splendor. He sat by a table, head on his hands, eyes closed as if taking a nap.

At that moment, my heart gave a start.

[1] what a good name – Shao Hua (勺嬋) “beautiful spoon” vs. shaohua (韶华), “beautiful springtime, glorious youth”. They sound the same, but are written differently with distinct meanings.

Chapter 30: A Clingy Servant

The windows were open with the pear blossoms in bloom, their petals floating in the air. A few had landed on Fang Hua's shoulder, releasing their sweet fragrance into the room.

"Lord Fang Hua." Nongyu nudged my shoulder as he called out to him.

He nodded back, somewhat befuddled. Those eyelashes shook as if passing through 1,000 years of time before he opened them. I heard Nongyu exhale. It wasn't just him; my heart started beating rapidly as well.

His plain white face made the mole beneath his eye extremely distinct and colorful. Though only a few days had passed since I'd seen him, he seemed to have changed slightly...I couldn't say what it was, but the eyebrows and hair on his temples, along with the quiet, drooping eyes, seemed to make his face a bit more bewitching. He was no less delicate and pretty, but there was a hint of anxiety between his brows. This feeling seemed to hang still for an instant; then it was gone like fading mist...

It seemed that he could disappear at a moment's notice.

While I wasn't paying attention, he'd already resumed his cool, indifferent expression. Two eyes gave a chilly glance at Nongyu, who stared blankly for a while before he recovered to point at the group of trembling people with a smile. "I happened to see these court ladies loitering outside, why not let them serve you indoors? Could it be that

they've upset Lord Fang?"

"I want to drink water."

"They didn't give you water?"

"They did," Before that merciless, level voice could settle down, a frosty sentence followed. "But I don't like coming in contact with others."

So he drove them rather unskillfully outdoors.

I could completely understand. Nodding my head, I resisted the urge to smile as I stole a peek. Nongyu's facial expression was stuck in place, his smile blatantly forced.

"Lord Fang isn't to blame...it's because they weren't clever enough, so I brought you someone who can work today." He reached behind and grabbed me, pushing me over. Fang Hua didn't spare me a glance but turned away, lifting the teapot on the table to pour himself a cup of tea. He pinched it between his hands and raised it closer...before his brow furrowed.

He replaced the cup in its original spot, as if disgusted. "You came here...for what reason, exactly?"

Nongyu didn't seem to understand his dismissal, but walked forward a few steps as if planning to set a chair by his table and make small talk. Before he could take a seat, a young eunuch hurriedly ran inside, his robes covered in sweat and his face exceptionally anxious. He didn't even

have time to pay respects before creeping close to say something...

My ears pricked, but I couldn't hear clearly.

Nongyu suddenly stood up and clasped his hands towards Fang Hua. "There's a matter in the court, so I'll take my leave now." Afterwards, he glanced over at me with a pensive smile. "Take good care of Lord Fang Hua."

Nice guy...

He's probably really leaving.

The rooms suddenly became absolutely deserted. Court ladies and eunuchs clustered outside with their heads bowed all properly, yet afraid to come in. Fang Hua sat upright at the table, a face filled with solemnity.

Actually...

It was just an empty front.

His inner thoughts were very simple. He was taciturn and expressed little with his face. But for the servants of the palace, who were used to acting according to the situation and cues...this attitude really was a bit frightening.

Tsk, tsk, see how many days he can last in the palace.

I plopped my butt to sit down directly across him. Each of the people outside were jolted into stupefaction, but not one made a sound to stop me.

Fang Hua only lifted an eyelid to give me one glance, head on his hands as his fingers fiddled with the wood patterns...then stared at the table until he started blanking out.

See?

He was really easy to bully.

He had no concept that lords and servants couldn't sit at the same table. Though he appeared to have an elegant, graceful carriage, his heart was in a mess...

I recalled him saying that he wanted to drink some water.

Rolling up my sleeves, I grabbed the teapot, lifting the lid to look inside...and my eyebrows knitted. After pouring a cup, there was only a mouthful left. I stood up and raised my hand towards an eunuch whose face was filled with fear and trepidation. "You, come here."

Fang Hua looked at me, flabbergasted.

Such revolting behavior...

I ignored him.

I smiled and rested my arm around the eunuch's shoulders, stuffing the teapot in his hands as I spoke below my voice. "In the future, prepare two teapots for this house. Leave tea leaves out of one but put them in the other, and make sure that one's kept scalding hot at all times."

He was obviously surprised. I gave him a side glance. "Understood?"

"Y...y-yes, Little Li will do it right away."

Fang Hua's habits were a bit different from ordinary humans, and this went for drinking water as well. One cold, one hot. You had to boil spring water or well water and wait for it to cool before he drank it.

As for the water with tea leaves, it had to be poured while it was scalding hot...even on a warm day, he'd hold it and drink it slowly... As soon as the water turned lukewarm and acceptable for humans, he couldn't bear it, or touch it even if he was dying.

The people in the palace really did their jobs fast. It took a moment's effort to send over the tea water. Pouring a cup, I carried it over to him.

His eyelashes shook slightly as he stared at my hands, before moving upwards to rest on my face with a smile. Under the gaze of countless eyes, he actually drank it. The court ladies and eunuchs by the door were all shocked.

Afterwards, when I became more familiar with them, I learned that although Fang Hua had come to the palace for many days, he rarely

drank the water handed over by other people. Don't ask me why, but I think it was probably because the water didn't meet his standards...

"Don't block my way, all of you get lost." a delicate, pampered voice drifted over, both tender and crisp. The 'get lost' part was especially forceful. Light, quick footsteps came from outdoors, followed by the sound of silver bells. With a shuaa, the people outside all grew fearful and fell to their knees as a light yellow silhouette charged inside, filling the rooms with flowery fragrance.

"Lord Hua, your servant picked some flowers for you again."

A pair of vivid eyes stared at me from a 13 to 14 year old girl. She was wearing the clothes of a court lady and looked extremely cute. Within the folds of some satiny fabric was wrapped the budding heads and gorgeous blooms of various flowers. She looked at Fang Hua, then at me. "...huh? This is..."

Lady...

That's what I wanted to ask, too.

Don't you know a girl can't just charge into a grown man's quarters? Especially...if those were my family's Fang Hua's rooms.

Fang Hua pointed at the girl. "Little Huang[1]." In the end...he pointed at me as well as he spoke to her. "This is someone who's serving me."

What a terse introduction to each other. Little Huang...does he think

he's keeping a dog[2]?

Though I was worse off, seeing as I didn't even have a name.

I knitted my eyebrows and looked at her, my heart full of uncertain thoughts. Fang Hua tended to avoid trouble whenever possible, but he was being very benevolent today by speaking so much.

The hostility from that girl became clearer.

Although her expression was resentful, that bright red face was like a tender flower, and she really was a small and beautiful person. I chanced a look and kept my gaze on the vast variety of flowers...pear blossoms, Chinese peonies, tree peonies...

This was...?

Fang Hua's eyes and mine both focused on one point.

Sweet-scented oleander.

This girl, was she here to deliver edibles...or poison someone? Although Fang Hua's skill in dispelling poisons was singlehandedly brilliant, the imperial palace differed from his own place...the flowers here didn't even bloom according to the seasons, so who knew how many times more poisonous the sweet-scented oleander could be?

Fang Hua was absolutely still. Heart sinking, I squeezed my way

through and grabbed an armful from the pile of flowers wrapped up in the satin. I bent down, my eyes crafty as I spoke. "Many thanks to Miss Little Huang...seeing you carry all these, they must be heavy, so allow me."

Her eyebrows narrowed. "You're calling me 'Little Huang' as well?!"

This child didn't like it when people made mistakes.

I rubbed my nose and quickly back up a few steps. Originally I wanted to shut the door, but I gave an eeee? of surprise as my eyes narrowed. A silhouette covered in purple gauze leisurely arrived, surrounded by a cluster of eunuchs and court ladies.

Abruptly, two hands propped themselves on the doors. I started as an eunuch gave me a look to kneel before rubbing his throat to announce, "The noble consort has arrived."

Little Huang seemed to have seen her and flustered, moved to hide behind Fang Hua.

Noble consort?

I stared at Fang Hua, who also looked at a loss.

"Well...it's certainly lively in this room," said a gentle, demure voice. Three parts as delicate and frail as the willow, seven parts filled with sumptuous luxury and wealth, a very beautiful woman had appeared....though she still looked inferior to Fang Hua.

Her pretty eyes looked about the room and a impressive, imposing voice pressed on, "Xuan'er[3], come out."

That tiny brat of a child hiding behind Fang Hua dawdled for a while before stepping out and hastily running over to hug the woman's leg.

"Mother."

"You're wearing court ladies' clothes to run around and play again. I'll need to punish you when we return," that woman raised her hand to pinch the tiny face, though she didn't dare to use much strength. Her face was even smiling. Then she looked at Fang Hua, and the eyes above her smile turned cold. "These few days my child has always been running over here, I really am sorry for the inconvenience."

Fang Hua's mouth still stayed as before, and he neither spoke nor answered. There was only a magnificent and peerless smile.

The noble consort's gaze grew dim and she gave a light wave. Quickly, the eunuch behind her carried over a lunch box and handed it over.

"I specifically instructed the imperial kitchens to make a few pastries and edibles. Kindly accept this small gift of mine, Lord Hua." She turned to look around a few times before speaking. "I was wondering why the servant girls I sent out to pick flowers couldn't find any. It seems like they were all sent to you."

"If the noble consort likes them, she may take them all."

"How could that be good? I just prefer for my servants to pick fresh flowers as hairpins. Originally, I thought only females would enjoy these things. I never expected Lord Hua to like them as well." Her hand touched a flower and paused as she spoke, smiling. "I've long heard that Lord Hua not only has exceptional medical skills, but handsome looks as well. Though you've entered the palace for a few days now, the emperor's illness hasn't improved. But your looks really do match your reputation... dazzling both men and women, old and young alike. No wonder the crown prince invited you here from a thousand li[4] away."

This woman's words were filled with barbs. I gave Fang Hua a rather anxious glance, yet he was sitting upright at the table, leisurely sipping tea with a cool, indifferent smile. Little Huang gazed at him with an expression of utmost adoration.

"Help mother pick one of the bigger flowers," the beautiful woman lightly pinched her cheeks, though the girl was clearly unwilling.

I hurriedly used both hands to respectfully present the most beautifully blooming peony. Her eyes crinkled into a smile as she raised it with her hand and looked into the mirror, inserting it into her hair in an extremely elegant and graceful manner.

She really was very beautiful...

The woman glanced sideways and gave an eunuch a meaningful look. That person immediately moved forward to fold up the satin cloth and carry away the remaining flowers. She too, raised herself higher to speak a few conventional amenities, before valiantly dragging away her

resisting child, who turned to look back reluctantly every three steps.

Outside, she was still using her hands to touch her hair, conveniently smoothing her face along the way.

I had a rather devious smile. Go and touch...touch as much as you want...

Fool.

You dared to find faults with yifu in front of me? I'll make you taste suffering. By chance, my hands had been itching to do something, so I put some poisoned powder into the flowers, although it wasn't much... enough to have your face break out in a rash and confine you to bed from ten days to half a month.

The people and happenings within the imperial court were even more complicated than I imagined...

I closed the door and sucked in a breath. How did Fang Hua endure these few days? I followed his shadow to look at him, my thoughts in another world. He was in the middle of turning around, back to me and head lowered as he busied himself with something.

I stuck my neck over.

He spread open a small fold of ragged cloth. As if holding the most precious treasure, he raised the pastries gifted by the noble consort and gave it a sniff, selecting a few to put into the snow-white material. Then

he folded it up and placed it within his robes.

This material looked very familiar... It was a piece of cloth from the inner robes he often wore at home.

"Sire, what exactly are you doing?" I was curious. Could it be that he'd gotten sick of eating flowers...and was now eating pastries? Even so, a change like that wasn't worth hiding in his clothing.

"I'm going to save it for Shao'er," he muttered to himself. "She's never eaten anything this good..."

His tone was faint, but extremely soft and tender, as if recounting something very ordinary. But my heart suddenly trembled as I came to a realization.

If he kept it in his robes like this, wouldn't they spoil by the time he left the palace?

Around midday, I began to get drowsy, and my eyelids drooped ferociously. Court ladies had no time to break at noon. While in the imperial physicians' courtyard, I had occasional small breaks, but Fang Hua had very few eunuchs and court ladies, so even one missing person was very conspicuous. Thus, I had to make do in spite of the hardships.

The crown prince arrived around lunchtime and had stayed until now with no intention of leaving...

I fished out the red lotus from my robes and sniffed it to invigorate

myself, before my hand reached out to block Little Li and take the tea from his hands. I pushed open the door to the room, lowered my head, and walked forward.

Han Zichuan seemed to be discussing something with Fang Hua, and the atmosphere seemed somewhat strange...

The crown prince was holding a work of calligraphy between his fingers... Beside Fang Hua's elbow sprawled book after book of poetry. I gave it a glance but kept silent, quietly serving the tea.

It wasn't strange to see Fang Hua reading medical texts...but when did he pick up poetry? That was a strange story.

"Fang Hua's skills in the qin and chess can be recognized as the best, but I didn't foresee that your calligraphy and painting skills would leave me with no hope of catching up. Why..." Han Zichuan tilted his head, finger sliding past the pages as his smiling eyes patiently swept over Fang Hua. He spoke in a low voice. "...does Shao'er not know anything?"

Talking about me behind my back...

How disgraceful.

"Shao'er's innate talents are excellent, but her personality is indolent and careless," Fang Hua sipped a mouthful of tea. "If she wants to learn, I'll teach her. If she doesn't, she can do as she pleases. A person only has one life. To live a day happily is a worthy day."

My eyes curved into a smile, though I could only listen from a corner without doing anything.

Fang Hua raised his head to ask a question. "You've come here to rest for ages. Is there anything else?"

Han Zichuan inclined slightly and spoke in an easy tone, "I did come for a purpose, but this time I forgot." He lowered his head and scooped up his sleeves, using the fabric as a buffer to raise his tea and blow on it furiously.

He and I acted the same way...

After staying with Fang Hua for so long, we understood his habits. Every time we had tea with him we had to save ourselves by blowing until the water was lukewarm before we dared to drink it.

He lifted an eye towards Fang Hua as if recalling something, and sighed. "That's right. This morning, the imperial physicians came with news that father's illness has gotten worse. This time, you really have to go help take a look."

His own father was close to dying from sickness, yet he still felt carefree enough for idle chatter...how impressive.

Fang Hua didn't speak, but muttered to himself. From my perspective, he would refuse this time. Yet his eyebrows furrowed and he raised his head, fingers knocking against the table. "It's not advisable to delay. Show me the way."

Then he rose and slowly spoke to me. "Take the acupuncture needles in the pouch on the rack, you'll be coming with me."

Me?

Why me...

Wait, I can see the emperor now.

[1] Little Huang (小黄) — xiao huang, or "Little Yellow." Huang is most likely a surname.

[2] keeping a dog (当养狗么) — dang yang gou mo, another way to say 'does he think he's keeping pets'. Little Huang is a type of nickname you'd find on dogs...

[3] Xuan'er (旋儿) — diminutive form for Xuan (probably a given name). The literal definition is a "circle", or "to revolve/spin, come back."

[4] a thousand li away (千里迢迢) — qianli tiaotiao, which could mean a thousand li away or stand in as an idiom for any far away distance.

Chapter 31: Strange Illness (Part 1)

The imperial palace was extremely luxurious.

The old man emperor lived in a main hall that was resplendent without measure. Wherever the eyes looked, everything glittered...the dragon pearls embellishing the walls were extremely huge, and really made a person drool with envy.

The common people were suffering, but he sure knew how to enjoy himself, though that had stopped now.

A fine vermillion canopy screened a bed from view, its fabric embroidered with gold dragons baring their fangs and claws. A hazy form could be seen within, accompanied by the loud noises of someone gasping for breath.

He sounded very uncomfortable...

For a person confined to bed with a weak body, it was important to maintain proper airflow. With this gauze in the way, wouldn't it only exacerbate his sickness?

"Your servant pays respects to His Imperial Highness."

The sudden voice frightened me after I had finally managed to steady Fang Hua's medical instruments in my arms. Peering from behind, I saw Nongyu catch my eye with a smile that wasn't quite a smile.

Strange, he was here too.

His medical knowledge was exemplary, so he should know these things. Even if the servants had forgotten to open the windows and draw the screens, he should remind them. Why wasn't he interfering or paying the matter any attention now?

Han Zichuan swept his robes, filled with the imposing air of a crown prince. "Rise. How is father's illness?"

"After a months-long coma, he awoke briefly to mutter a few things before losing consciousness. Now that Lord Fang Hua's come to personally treat him, the emperor's illness will certainly get better." Nongyu's expression was one of sincerity, his sleeves spread open in a bow. His figure was infused with ceremony and propriety the whole time he led us to the monarch's bed.

A servant lifted aside the bed-curtains. Inside was a roughly 40 to 50-year-old man with emaciated features lying on the bed. His face was deathly pale, yet his lips were a blackish red, and the space between his eyebrows seemed a bit dark. As for the original eyebrows, they were already gone.

This was the current emperor? It looked like he was close to dying...

I gave a glance and noticed that Fang Hua had already pulled up his sleeves to lift aside the bedcovers. He didn't take a pulse, but just pressed on the body in random places. There was no way to know the status of his diagnosis.

An indistinct sound rose as a torrent from the patient's lips. Fang Hua knitted his brows and didn't move, but reached behind him towards me... His finger shook impatiently two or three times. I blinked my eyes and fell into thought...

My head lowered to look within the pouch and its varying sizes of acupuncture needles. Which one did he want?

As it turned out, he lost patience waiting and slowly turned to give me another silent look. Those fingers moved over and past me to plunder the bag and take out a handful of needles. There were thick ones and thin ones, long ones and short ones. Their silvery light glinted back and forth in his hands as he poked the emperor like a doll. Casting all caution to the winds, the needles swooped down...until every single point had a needle in place.

I was silent...

Nongyu looked as if he hadn't processed everything yet, and Han Zichuan was completely floored.

In the beginning, the emperor still had a breath...now there wasn't a sound. How tragic. Although the emperor had snatched resources from all under the heavens, Fang Hua had now pricked him black and blue all over into silence. That's why the saying went, 'no matter who you offend, never offend a doctor.'

Fang Hua sat down and waited for a while. Han Zichuan and Nongyu must have had plenty of faith in his medical skills because neither

expressed any anxiety or misgivings. Instead, both retreated to the sides to talk about state affairs or the price by weight of medicinal ingredients.

My head drooped as I held the cloth bag in my arms, bored into drowsiness. Suddenly, a sleeve flashed before my face, startling me awake...just in time to see Fang Hua extend his hand, warm it up a bit, and start pulling out the needles.

The silver needles had flashed when they were stabbed in and still gleamed as they were pulled out, with no changes in color.

Remarkable.

Just by looking at the emperor's face, he was definitely poisoned...but there was no way to scope out the source. I held my cloth and reached out to receive the needles, but Fang Hua brushed me aside, shaking his head as he gave me a cold glance. While I was trying to puzzle him out, he blew on a needle held between his fingers.

Goodness...

The shiny needle immediately turned black, giving one a sense of dread.

"This poison is very odd and hard to perceive. The needles I stuck inside....most of them changed colors. I'm afraid that the poison has already hurt his internal organs."

"Is there any possibility of a cure?" Han Zichuan's face sank as he

hurried over.

"I'll write a prescription first to temporarily restrain the poison. The rest will be left for afterward." Fang Hua turned his glance towards me, and I took the hint to start grinding some ink from the inkstick.

He raised his sleeves without a second thought, writing words with a brush like floating clouds and flowing water[1] as he recorded the name of the ingredients and its various weights. I cast a sidelong glance and saw that it was a medicine he rarely prescribed... I used to jokingly call it a miracle pill, and had sold it for a high price to Nongyu.

Nongyu took the formula into his hands and carefully reviewed it, before calling for the eunuchs to bring over the stove.

This guy...

He really was lazy, insisting on making his inferiors labor before him. I wanted to help, but Fang Hua lightly held me back, quietly shaking his head. Then he lowered his head and went about his own business, drinking tea. Han Zichuan stared at me with shining eyes, before giving a thoughtful gaze towards Fang Hua, and sat down on a chair to play with a ring on his finger[2].

Two or three eunuchs carefully followed the formula to measure out the weights for each ingredient. Nongyu directed them from the sides and frequently jumped in to do the job himself. I couldn't hold back a yawn as I closed my eyes, though I suddenly caught a glimpse of a certain young eunuch briefly raising his sleeve. I looked down and fell silent.

A decoction of medicinal ingredients had been cooking for around four hours, enough to fill many small bowls. The eunuchs handling the bowls had to drink first, then the imperial physicians, before it reached the emperor. Each of them looked as if they were drinking a rebirth elixir[3], their eyebrows knitted as they held their bowls while shaking in fear. I really wanted to laugh...

They were a bunch of fools. The good fortune they'd cultivated in former lives allowed them this chance to drink such a treasured medicine. Just one sip would prevent light poisons from entering the body for half a year.

I pursed my lips and walked over, getting myself a bowl. Abruptly, I felt a heated stare at my back that put me ill at ease. I started, uncomprehending, before lifting a bowl to take a whiff....before my eyebrows knitted and I took a sip.

Wrong.

This taste was wrong.

The prescription was accurate, but this decoction was missing a certain element.

Nongyu used a sleeve to wipe his mouth. "There are no issues with the medicine. Take it to use on the emperor." I gave him an astonished glance. Fang Hua's expression was serene as he raised the bowl to take a whiff. Whatever thoughts he had, he didn't utter them.

My heart sank slightly as I looked at the ruler on his last breath. A wry smile appeared on my lips. With so many people who wanted you dead... how could you not die?

Nongyu had once bought the pill version of this particular medicine from my very hands. If he had given it to you timely, your illness wouldn't have dragged on so long or made you suffer so much. Now there was medicine, but someone had intentionally left out one of the ingredients.

What was the use in taking it?

How could an imperial physician have such gall? Looks like someone was instigating him behind his back. My eyes drifted past to the filial crown prince on one side, presenting tea and pouring water, and was caught in his gaze. Han Zichuan sat on a chair, his head propped on his hands as he looked at me with a smile that wasn't a smile. My scalp turned numb, and I made do to slowly lower my head, my hands holding an empty bowl as I stared absently at the ground.

The imperial palace...

Maybe it really was as Fang Hua said, and more complicated than the jianghu.

Six hours finally passed. Watching them hurrying up and down, dismantling the pot and stove, shutting the bed-curtains and closing the doors, I felt a bit faint. I forcefully roused myself and stuck it out for a bit, but my heart felt much more carefree when we left.

The sun set as willow catkins swirled in the air. I closed my eyes. The affair was over, and the circumstances had shifted. Everything seemed to suggest that things had remained the same, but the people had changed.

"These unaffected pear blossoms in the mist, the numerous willow catkins floating in the air, isn't this a fine scene?" a soft and gentle voice drifted over from behind me. I paid it no mind, but continued walking forward at my own pace. Then, someone clapped me from behind and painfully caught me by the shoulder.

"Shao'er..."

I turned my face, expressionless.

Before me stood Han Zichuan with a slight smile, though his gaze was slightly uncertain. He gave me a fixed stare before asking in a low voice, "Shao'er, it's you, right?"

"Crown Prince, your highness." I respectfully hailed him, "Your servant doesn't quite understand your words."

He slowly released his grip, eyebrows furrowing as he looked at me in surprise.

"Why is it like this....? You don't look alike or sound alike," he seemed disappointed as he muttered to himself, "But...why do your figures from the back look so similar?"

He circled me as if wanting to say more. I only smiled with an innocent expression. Fang Hua was walking ahead, but turned to look back and speak in a light tone. "Let's go."

My heart eased, and I couldn't help but hasten my steps to catch up. The whole way I tried to fathom how much Fang Hua had heard, but he didn't speak a word, nor did he look at me once. When we returned to our rooms, Fang Hua's expression became noticeably fatigued, and he sat on the bed with a blank face.

I was led aside to have a meal. Since the court ladies and eunuchs had already eaten, there were only leftovers. Fortunately, Little Li had left some wheat flour mantou for me. Though they smelled delicious, their taste had no flavor in my mouth.

Yifu's behavior today was a bit weird, which made me very restless and uneasy. I chewed on my last bite while I washed my hands, lost in thought for a short while. Then, I slowly carried over some hot water and a clean washcloth to his door and knocked a few times.

"Come in." The voice was chilly.

The wooden door had a heavy sound.

I raised my eyes to see Fang Hua changed into a plain white inner robe, sitting blankly on the bed. In that moment it was as if he'd stolen my breath away...

He was still in the same position as when I'd left him, leaning

completely against the wall as he sat on the bed. His expression was lonely and desolate, hand propping up his head as he looked out the window. The whole scene seemed as placid as water. Hazy moonlight shone on his body, and the snow-white robes seemed to emanate a light glow. His eyebrows were especially gentle and soft...

Right now, he seemed to be filled with an indescribable sorrow that weighed him down and made my heart ache.

"Lord Hua, your servant carried over some hot water for you to soak your feet."

He started, looking at me as if finding it hard to believe, before slowly replying with, "Thank you."

I managed to smile with difficulty, meekly walking forward to set down the basin and quietly keep watch from the bed, raising an eye to look at him. Fang Hua's expression seemed to hesitate as he lowered his legs from the bed, shifting his snow-white robes upwards while placing his pretty feet over the basin, but not in the water.

I carefully wrapped his feet in the cloth and wiped it lightly with warm water. He shook a bit but didn't flinch back...

I know he didn't like touching people, so I avoided directly brushing his skin. From what I heard from the court eunuchs, masters really enjoyed it when servants waited upon them this way. The hot water helped a person to relax, and the various positions on the foot could relieve stress when pressed...though I had yet to learn them, I still wanted to do something for him.

Although this was all I could do now...

It was very clear that my movements were clumsy and awkward.

"I've troubled you," he lowered his head and lightly smiled. I only felt exceedingly embarrassed, and my face started to burn. My hands didn't know where to go either and waved a few times, splashing water on myself. He sat upright, the corners of his mouth still pulled into a smile. Beneath the moonlight, his expression was particularly temperate and mild. My heart pitter-pattered out of control as I quickly looked away.

Hazy forms rested against the walls, one big, one small. One was sitting, while the other was leaning in by its feet. As the shadows weighed down, a section of hair swept past my face and a delicate fragrance entered my nose. Surprised, I had no time to duck aside.

I only saw a pair of white slender fingers move towards the front of my robes and touched them lightly. He conveniently drew out a red lotus, its petals scattered and near the point of wilting away.

[1] floating clouds and flowing water (行云流水) —xingyun liushui, idiom for something natural and spontaneous

[2] ring on his finger (扳指) —banzhi, ornamental thumb ring, usually made from jade and originally worn by ancient archers to protect their thumbs when drawing a bowstring.

[3] rebirth elixir (投胎药) — toutaiyao, in which 'toutai' describes the spirit undergoing reincarnation after the body dies, and 'yao' is medicine/pill/etc.

Chapter 31: Strange Illness (Part 2)

He scared three souls out of my seven[1].

Nice guy, you still can't tell the differences between males and females. You still did...whatever you wanted to do.

"This flower is very beautiful. Did you set it aside for me?"

"Unfortunately, I crushed it." I gave a dead stare to those jade-like, translucent white fingers around the gorgeous red lotus, lightly stroking the flower...ambiguous enough to make me start. I looked up to see him studying me intently, and my face reddened as I choked back, "...that's not really it. I saw it growing colorfully by the pond so I sort of wanted to pick one for you." The more I spoke, the more I sounded like a mosquito, out of breath.

His expression then was very lovely, and the gaze from those long, slender eyes was enough to steal my soul away.

In that instant, my heart had completely fallen to the enemy's hands.

"The water's getting cold..." he called out, as if wronged greatly.

I hurriedly wrung my cloth and bent down. Yet he held onto my shoulders and lightly shook his head. "You shouldn't do things like this." He took away my cloth and wiped himself dry before retreating to the bed. He resumed covering himself with his robes, and I looked away

before he asked lightly, "The jianghu is fine, so why did you come to the palace?"

His indifferent words were enough to scare me out of my wits.

Was it possible that...he'd recognized me long ago?

Seized with panic, I stood up a bit helplessly and tried to keep calm. His forehead was knotted in the midst of his tranquility, though his eyes were smiling. That soft, unhurried voice said, "If I had any family, I wouldn't let them come here. You can still dress warmly and eat your fill among ordinary people. With exceptional natural talents among your generation, it would be simple to make a name for yourself wandering from place to place, living free and unfettered. Why then, would your parents ever send you to become a court lady?"

I lifted my eyes to look at him, seeing no moodiness on his face. I couldn't figure out whether he was trying to feel me out or simply chat. It was best not to ask him anything now in case he grew suspicious, but I couldn't help it. There was one thing...that had been on my mind for a long time.

If I didn't ask now and missed my chance, I'd definitely regret it in the future. I resisted with great difficulty and gripped my robes. "Lord Hua... why did you enter the palace?" His mild gaze swept across my face, making me feel a bit flushed before he looked away.

"For a certain person, I had no choice but to act against my will." He was looking out the window.

"Your beloved?"

He only smiled without speaking.

That was neither a yes or no, but looking at his particularly lonely expression, I lowered my eyes, feeling an indescribably throbbing pain.

Yifu, what exactly am I to you?

The candle flame flickered. Though these rooms were so big, I still felt like there was no place for me to stay.

"I've already spoken, but you haven't answered me in exchange..." He propped himself up and got closer, his line of vision lowering until he asked me softly, "Why were you so insistent on entering the palace?"

He tenderly gazed at me and I looked away, unable to hold my own as I cleared my throat. "I'm not Lord Hua with his consummate medical skills. I have a mother, a young brother and an elder over 80-years-old at home. Our days are rather difficult, so if I entered the palace, my family's livelihood should be much better."

He carefully looked at me, the stares raising goosebumps.

"...forget it, I won't talk with you about these things, " He shifted back slightly with a smile. "During the emperor's diagnosis today, did you notice anything suspicious?"

"The eunuchs' actions were a bit unusual."

"Go on," His hand rested on his lip as if in deep thought, though the posture was exceedingly elegant.

I could guess his thinking, and paused before speaking, "A certain young eunuch burned a bit of medicinal ingredients into ashes behind his back, instead of adding it into the pot."

He nodded with a smile.

"Sharp eyes. Can you name which ingredient it was that he burned?"

I opened my mouth, before hastily shutting up.

Hold it in...

I couldn't say it aloud. Wasn't this moving a stone to stub my own toe?
[2]

"Your servant is only a useless girl and naturally isn't acquainted with all kinds of plants like Lord Hua. Moreover, the imperial palace has many valuable and precious medicines and that person moved so quickly, so it was hard to see."

"Your martial arts skills are presumably not bad, or else how could you catch that person's trickery?"

"Things are naturally complex within the court, unlike the outside world."

He gave me a close look. "Speak little and do less, or else no one will be able to protect you."

I gave a start. What else did he want to say...?

But he actually lifted his sleeve and placed his hand on my head, stroking it softly. This action was very familiar and casual to the utmost. It was as if everything had suddenly become a dream, and we were back to our lives at the house.

Every time he touched me like this, no matter what earthshaking events had happened, I would calm down without uttering a word. It grew to the extent that he became accustomed to stroking the flowers, the plants, the rabbits...even Zichuan.

At this moment, what did he think I was?

I took an obvious step back.

He started, then released me with a cheerless voice. "It's getting late, you should go to bed."

I gave him an uncertain glance, but he turned his back to me and didn't say anything more. My heart sank, and I replied an affirmative before pausing and leaving through the doors.

There, I hesitated again.

My eyes drifted to the figure in the crack between the walls and the door. He was sitting on the bed, digging around until he pulled out some cloth-covered objects from his shirt jacket. In a flash, the indifference on his face shifted to something gentle and soft.

In that instant, my heart softened and shifted.

The night was late, yet I had no desire to sleep. I hugged my knees, squatting outside his rooms for a long time as I was chilled by the winds.

It was supposed to be my turn to keep the night watch, and my bed had already been prepared in one of his side rooms. Now his kind words had urged me outdoors.

A conundrum...

The pale yellow candlelight flickered in the room, looking rather warm. He seemed to have trouble sleeping as well, pacing lightly in his quarter. His clothes rustled as they swayed, and I pressed against the door crack to take another look indoors.

He stood before the writing desk with his back to me, fiddling with his hands. And yet the movements of his hands suddenly stilled, as if he was staring at something...he stroked something else for a bit, reluctant to let it go, the gentleness radiating from his form enough to move a person's heart.

Fang Hua.

I used to think I understood him very well, but after leaving the house, he seemed to hold even more secrets, secrets that no one had the ability to touch. There were too many things I didn't know or had no ways of finding out...

The candle flame within the rooms finally went out, and spaces within and beyond the rooms became filled with the same cold desolation. I sat by until I couldn't take it anymore. After sneezing, I wiped my face with my sleeves and snuck in through the doors.

There was the sound of someone turning over on the bed.

I held my breath, originally intending to sneak into the side room with no one the wiser, but my feet carried me over to Fang Hua's side instead.

He slept calm and steadily, the moonlight falling upon his form like flowing waters. Even his sleeping position was refined and elegant, flooded in the glow of moonbeams. His forehead and his closed eyes were fine to observe...measure by measure, it was a sight a person couldn't get enough of.

I took a deep breath, resisting the urge to touch him, and got up to survey my surroundings before slowly approaching the writing desk.

There was only one object on the empty table in the darkness. My fingers seemed to touch a bundle wrapped in cloth, and I conveniently

took it to the window to open it under the moonlight.

My eyes swept past a container of rouge, a jade ring, a butterfly hairpin, and a carefully cloth-wrapped package of snacks...and saw the pastries from the noble consort that Fang Hua had packed with a section of his inner robes, next to the scattered remains of the red lotus resting on the white cloth, exuding an intoxicatingly delicate scent...

Wait a minute.

My eyes sharpened, and I brushed aside my hand to see...what was this, gold powder? Who knew where he scraped it from...

Fang Hua, you're ruthless...

Thoroughly ruthless. Anything taken from the imperial palace could sell for a good price outside...was it worth it to scrape stuff off people's walls as well?

I pinched the powder between my hands to examine it carefully, and sniffed it. The quality was excellent, yellow and glistening. Was it possible that he took advantage and took some from the emperor's room while treating his illness...?

I looked over to Fang Hua, who was sleeping soundly on his side, and my hand shook.

Although we weren't well off at our house, it wasn't worth stealing to this extent. It was hard to tell whether the royal palace's invitation was a

good thing or a bad thing for you.

Even my love of silver paled to this...you have my respects.

[1] three souls out of my seven (七魂失了三) — qihun shile san, ancient Chinese belief spoke of the human bodies having multiple souls. You can read more on the details [here](#).

[2] moving a stone to stub my own toe (搬石头砸自己的脚) — banshitou zazijidejiao, idiom for “shooting oneself in the foot”, *etc.*

Chapter 32: Two or Three Incidents of Adultery

I awoke with a yawn the next day to discover my bed in a mess. There was a delicate fragrance by my pillow, and a small quantity of ashes that seemed to be the remains of an incense stick for calming and soothing the nerves.

Who put it here?

I looked around, bending over to put on my shoes as I got off the bed. Draping my clothes over my shoulders, I went to the room next door. Fang Hua's bedcovers were neatly folded, and he was nowhere to be seen.

The sun shone through the window lattices as it spilled into the room. The surface of the writing desk was empty, and the objects lying there last night had also disappeared, as if...

I suddenly realized I had overslept.

The doors opened lightly from outside, and Little Li entered with a basin of water, his head lowered. I turned around, still looking unpresentable, and scratched my head in perplexity. "Do you know where Lord Hua went so early?"

When the young eunuch saw me, his expression was clearly shocked. A shaking finger pointed at me. "It's already midday and you've only just got out of bed?!"

In the end, he placed his hands in his sleeves, clicking his tongue and smiling as he circled me two or three times. "Lord Hua was called away very early in the morning to treat the emperor's illness at the main hall. You really are something, waking up after your master."

It's not like I wanted to...when I figure out who used that incense on me, then they'll have a good show...

The young eunuch had enough of ridiculing me and was now in profound thought. While staring at me, he suddenly knelt on the ground. Surprised, I backed away, but he only gave a knowing smile before wringing out a wet washcloth from the basin and wiping the floors.

So he was here to clean the floors...I thought he was bowing to me.

It was a novel sight, so I kneeled next to him and raised my own sleeves. "Doing work? How about I help too?"

"Hey, stop...stop that," he raised his eyebrows, looking around before pausing on my disorderly bedcovers with a dubious smile. "I can do it myself, so there's no need to trouble you. Or else, who knows how I'll be punished?" This fellow, he couldn't be thinking that last night Fang Hua and I...?

Curses, what kind of thoughts did he keep in his head?!

Helplessly, I left the room without a word. After the wind blew on me, I realized my stomach was empty and I was starving. I searched and pilfered through the rooms before resigning myself to the fact that the

court ladies and eunuchs hadn't left me any food.

My gloomy, dejected wanderings led me to who-knows-where.

Before me now was an expanse of peach blossoms blooming splendidly. A few delicate beauties as fine as jade stood in their midst, surrounding a male figure. A horse with a white mane pawed the dirt on one side with his hooves, whinnying occasionally.

Eh? Is horse-riding allowed inside the palace?

I used my sleeves to brush aside the branches, looking over a few more times. This horse was rather handsome with strong, robust legs. I wondered if they'd taste good if I roasted them. Two or three court ladies stood with faces flushed, the peach blossoms setting off their looks to make them all the more beautiful. These figures and those faces, as well as the gazes full of tender, timid affection...were really a captivating sight.

"Imperial physician, my master felt unwell upon waking up today." What a pleasant-sounding flirt.

"Imperial Physician Nong, my master felt dizzy last night. No matter what you say, you should come over to our place first." This one sounded soft and dainty.

Nongyu stood wordlessly smiling between them, his hand stroking the white horse like a virtuous sage as he gently muttered to himself, irresolute. "I'm busy attending to the emperor's well-being, so I need to leave the palace to handle some affairs."

"Really? That's so unlucky," the court ladies lowered their heads and held their handkerchiefs, exchanging glances with each other.

"Your masters' illnesses will be seen to by other imperial physicians," Nongyu seemed not to have noticed, his smile filled with modest courtesy on his gentle face.

Hmph...

Faker. He looked like a well-read scholar of the Confucian classics, but he was really a bad-intentioned weasel. Those girls were still young, so they didn't understand...tsk, tsk.

I sighed with emotion and prepared to leave, but he suddenly lifted his face and raised his eyebrows, moving apart from the others...to rest at my face with a thoughtful smile. My expression shifted and I exclaimed, not good!

"I still have something to take care of, so I'll be taking my leave," He gracefully mounted the horse, the black robes and white jade hairpin evoking the image of an immortal. Pulling back on the reins, his eyes swept towards me with an expression full of tenderness.

I lowered my head and silently walked away.

A burst of horse hooves unhurriedly swept by me. I gave a start and braced myself, but he didn't even look at me before waving his whip and stalk off, leaving...a big cloud of dust. I heaved a sigh of relief. Thank

goodness he was far off now, I thought he'd try something again. He'd scared me enough to set my heart pounding, always touching this and touching that without my permission.

Then my ears pricked up, and an ominous feeling rose from the depths of my heart. Why was the sound of horse hooves getting louder and closer...? The court ladies nearby also sucked in their breaths.

My head turned numb.

Suddenly, a pair of hands found themselves around my waist. There was a light laugh, and someone's breath tickled the hair on my temples. I blinked, and before I could react, my body was whisked off the ground, into the air...

While I was still badly shaken, a light jacket wrapped me tight in its embrace, its white down tickling my face immensely. Wind rushed past my ears, mixed with the laughter of the court ladies.

"Stupid Nongyu, what are you playing at?!"

"Shh, I want to take you somewhere before I leave the palace...don't make a fuss. Be careful your noise doesn't attract the guards." his finger lightly caressed my face, elegant eyebrows arching towards his temples in a wide smile.

His was an exceedingly handsome face that concentrated all his looks in one point. The sun shone upon it as he looked down at me...the light making it hard for me to open my eyes.

It was a bumpy ride atop the horse. With no way to grab the reins, I was tossed about dizzily, and my empty stomach ached.

"Ah, we made it."

Finally...

I practically slid off the horse to fall painfully on my butt. The earth was damp here, and a thick fragrance of flowers hovered nearby. I took a deep breath and found myself in the midst of a sea of blossoms.

"Do you like it?" Nongyu smiled as he stood by my side.

"More than like it, this is simply..." Too exciting.

I swallowed wordlessly, so happy I had to use a sleeve to wipe away my drool as my tongue clicked. These flowers were enough to feed Fang Hua for years. If yifu was brought here, he'd definitely find it hard to contain his joy. Then pour him some wine, and maybe he'd voluntarily pledge marriage to someone... These thoughts made me more and more excited as they galloped off without my will.

"Oh, that's right. Someone asked me to bring these to you." Nongyu pulled out a cloth bundle from the horse and tossed it to my arms, smiling as he looked at me. "Open it up and take a look."

I lowered my head uncertainly, weighing the package in my hands. It

didn't feel too strange, and the material was also extremely familiar...

"I have to leave the palace for a trip again today, so I'll be back at night." he said, voice like the sound of flowing water.

What did that have to do with me? Fellow brother, you don't need to tell me these things. It's fine even if you don't come back for three years. Not the least interested in his talk, I sat down and untied the knot of the bundle. In turn, golden powder spilled onto my clothes, and the faint forms of a jade ring and butterfly hairpin could be seen within. Still a bit uncertain, I reached in and found a container of rouge as well.

"The emperor's illness is still missing a certain ingredient to treat it, so I had the idea to look for it around Fang Hua's house. I've heard that many rare and difficult-to-find medicinal plants grow there. And so...when your yifu heard me talk, he told me to bring these things to you."

I lowered my head and silently dug into the bag.

Finally...I found something edible. My eyes brimmed with tears.

Nongyu sat down beside me, raising his robes to give me a rapt look as I devoured the food, speaking in a low tone. "Have or haven't you been listening? What misfortune did I incur to meet a personality like yours..."

I curved my eyes into a smile and bit off another large mouthful, my words jumbled. "You try being hungry for half a day without food. I bet you'd be no better."

His gaze grew increasingly soft as his hands reached behind and around my shoulders to tenderly stroke my hair. "When I return, I'll tell them they can't starve you."

"It's not their fault. I accidentally slept until noon so of course there was nothing left to eat."

He gave a start, thoughts swirling as he looked at me again. "Fang Hua sure treats you well..."

I peered at the cloth bag with a stupid grin on my face. "Where do you think he dug up that gold powder from?"

He seriously considered the question, falling silent for quite a while before answering honestly. "I was just trying to figure out why the gold walls in His Majesty's quarters looked so damaged..."

I was speechless. Fang Hua really was uncomplicated when it came to doing things. After burping, I took the chance to weigh the bag's items in my hands to estimate their worth.

"Did you eat your fill? Hn..." he scooted over, asking quietly.

I continued as before, stuffing the bag into his arms before giving him a simple-minded smile. "The things from the imperial palace really are tasty, so just bring the leftovers to my house. It's hard to hide these things when I'm living with him...that's right," I slowly moved closer to Nongyu and added softly, "Buried beneath the third Wutong tree in the backyard is a jar of fine wine. Just say that I asked you to bring it to yifu."

"When you open your mouth, it's always yifu. When have you ever thought of me...?"

I laughed in spite of myself, pulling up a sprig of dog-tailed grass^[1] to wave back and forth. "If there's anything you want over there, just take it yourself."

"I'm afraid you can't afford to give me what I want." Suddenly, the hand around my shoulders tightened as he pulled me into his lap. My eyes widened, and a rain of flowers flew into the air to float about us...as my head sank into the flowering plants, propped up by his hand. He was smiling as he leaned over and whispered gently by my ear, "I want you..."

I narrowed my eyes and looked at him. His gaze seemed to be seven parts joking and three parts serious, a certain banter showing itself through the unrestrained tenderness of his romantic charms.

I raised my hand and quietly touched his face, dumbfounded for a long while. "...why are you so handsome?" Not just handsome, but thick-skinned as well. How could you say such fraudulent words to a virgin girl in broad daylight?

He smiled, holding my hand to his face very comfortably as he gazed at me in rapt attention. Softly he asked, "So you're pleased with my looks? You like them immensely?"

This was some top-tier stuff... I've never seen anyone so shameless.

"Un. Your words aren't wrong, you're exceedingly handsome." I stroked him some more before pinching him. He actually closed his eyes as if he enjoyed it. After a few seconds, I gave him a sidelong glance and concluded, "Hard to tell, but it's probably one of your face masks."

He seized up before reacting, his expression completely dark. Rolling aside, he drew himself up and gave an embarrassed smile. "You really know how to ruin the mood."

I kept my head lowered to dust off my robes, speaking casually. "You've already had your joke, so it's time to get serious. Which medicinal ingredient are you missing that you have to look for at my house? Is the emperor's illness still treatable?"

He lifted his eyes to look at me. "What if I said it's all very official business?" His tone was light before he finally spoke with a grin. "Between everyone else under Heaven, only you would reject me like this."

I stilled. His face drew near to gaze fixedly at me, the pupils lit with a depressing air that resembled pale moonlight. It was as if I'd done him a great wrong.

A sham...this was all a sham. I told myself secretly, but that couldn't ward off the handsome man. His stare made me lose my bearings as he silently crept closer, a hand resting on my shoulder as he suddenly stole a kiss from my face.

I blinked a few times before I could react. The sensation vanished just as quickly, leaving a coolness behind when he pulled away his lips. His

eyelashes hid his gaze as he turned away, using a hand to prop up his head to stare at me anew. I touched my face and looked at him doubtfully. His eyes were particularly bright.

So much for that hint of anxiety from before....I'd gotten tricked again.

Curses!

"Y-y-you, just wait...!" I bent down and started grabbing poisons from my sleeves.

See if I don't poison you!

He held me still, waving an index finger impressively. "I wasn't taking advantage of you. That kiss was a token to pledge my love. Who knew you would wear this face mask every day? Each time I see it, I feel so touched that I can't control myself."

I couldn't speak. How else could I infiltrate the palace without wearing this mask? When did it become a love pledge token?

You're trying to con me again, huh?

That's right, this dear friend of mine was trying to change the topic. I caught his sleeve and pulled tight. "Why has the emperor's illness dragged on for so long? Is it still curable?" If it was difficult, then what was the point? Better to take yifu home instead.

"Affairs of the world are hard to ascertain. Many things aren't as simple as you think," he smiled a bit. "Actually, it's not hard to cure at all... besides, Fang Hua's here, isn't he?"

I smiled briefly, but didn't speak. Just from my observations these past few days... There were no problems with Fang Hua's prescription, but the results were like that...whether or not the real medicine even ended up in the emperor's stomach was hard to say.

"You can say what you like," he gradually withdrew his smile, picking up his loose clothing to recover his respectable appearance. His gaze was gentle and soft. "Even if you're full of ideas, your thoughts are written all over your face. It's rare to find such a simple person."

I only forced a smile, lightly rapping his shoulder. "What's up with you today? You're acting a bit off."

"Perhaps, but you should listen to my advice." The laughter in his eyes was replaced with sincerity. His gaze was brilliant. "No matter what you see or hear inside the palace, don't say anything publicly. It won't do you any favors."

I looked at him, completely uncomprehending.

He laughed like the first time I met him, virtuous and sagely, his expression considerate and cordial. "The complexities of the court are ever shifting. It's hard to read people's hearts. I don't know if I should allow you to continue living here, this choice might've been a mistake from the start..."

His hand stroked my hair.

"Shao'er, listen to me. You're not suited for this place."

I wasn't used to this. I grew familiar with his dishonest self, but this was the first time he was using such time and energy to advise me. Without even including the strange behaviors of the eunuchs who prepared the emperor's medicine, his single line here made it seem that a major crisis was imminent at court.

"No more chitchat, it's already getting late," he stood up, not even bothering to shake the bits of grass from his robes. "Although this is a fine steed, it'll still take me over half a day to run back and forth from Fang Hua's house."

"You finally remembered that someone's waiting for you to fetch medicine, huh."

His lips quirked as he mounted the horse, pausing before he spoke. "Suppose the emperor got well, what would you do afterward?"

I raised my eyes to stare at him. "I want to stay with yifu. Where he goes, I'll follow."

He smiled, bending down to look at me beneath the sunlight. "I have vast holdings of fertile land and numerous residences. My accumulated properties aren't flimsy at all. Moreover..." he drew nearer, as if discussing business. "I have no parents nor siblings, and I've yet to marry. Do you want to give me some consideration?"

"Imperial Physician Nong, if you don't leave now...I'm afraid the emperor's body won't hold out much longer to take your medicine."

The horse seemed impatient as well as it shifted from side to side. He held the reins and gave me a smile. "Shao'er, you have to remember my words." In the end, that smile was filled with deep meaning and urged one to think things over. Before I could react, he whipped his horse and left, leaving me with a face full of dust.

Pah...

After spitting, I stood stupefied. Something didn't seem right, but I couldn't figure out what until some time had passed. Grr, seriously...to think one way and act another...

Using those words to describe him was way too appropriate.

Nongyu, oh Nongyu, you look so mild and gentle, but your heart was ruthless. Such a long road back, and you tossed me here...how was I going to get home?

The plants grew with no signs of human habitation. Where the heck was I? I fumbled about the boundless sea of flowers until the sunlight started to fade. I didn't know when the setting sun starting shining on my back and made everything melancholy.

A fine steed, truly worthy of its title. When Nongyu took me captive on his horse, I was only jostled around on my stomach for a while. After I

found the palace on foot and returned to Fang Hua's quarters, it was already late at night...

[1] dog-tailed grass (狗尾巴草) —gouweiba cao, most likely a form of *Setaria viridis*, or wild foxtail millet.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Setaria_viridis

Chapter 33: Variables

The bright moon hung in the skies, but Fang Hua's residence was dark. There was a faint light shining from indoors when I snuck inside and closed the door behind me. Turning around, I only saw a few young eunuchs waiting in the courtyard with their heads drooping, not daring to make a sound. In fact, their bodies seemed to be trembling.

"What's wrong, did something happen?" I only just spoke when a storm of footsteps drifted through the darkness. Before I could recover from the shock, I was blinded by the glare reflecting off a group of swords. About a dozen or so guards stood before us in full battle array, their swords drawn.

I trembled and didn't even have time to back away. The leader of the imperial guards gave us all a frigid look and said, "Seize everyone here."

Ah...

Seize?

Why were they seizing Fang Hua's people? Not to mention, I'd only just entered this residence...why seize me as well?

My shoulders hurt from someone gripping me, but I didn't dare use my internal energy. Before anything serious happened, I resolved to endure it. Lack of forbearance in small matters could upset bigger plans.

We were brought before the halls of the old man emperor, where we discovered the eunuchs and court ladies of other masters were kneeling there shaking in fear. It was a chilly night, but the gates to the main hall were wide open, and the scent of medicine drifted out from its depths.

No incense was lit indoors, but all of the lanterns were gleaming. Though the scene was very bright, it also felt particularly empty and desolate. A brilliant yellow robe was spread on the ground where a person knelt by the bed, hands clutching the emperor's own. His eyes were red and his voice choked with sobs as he said over and over again, "Father...your son has been unfilial."

But the figure on the bed remained motionless.

The crown prince bent over and tightly embraced that person, body trembling as he slowly slid off the bed, his expression extremely sorrowful. He was the splitting image of a dutiful child and the sight was very moving.

What was this?

What had happened? I stared dazedly from my position kneeling on the ground, blinking furiously. An old eunuch wiped his eye with a sleeve, and announced in a shrill, drawn-out voice, "The emperor has passed away."

What...

Passed away?!

Across the empty halls and quiet spaces of the palace rang the low, mournful peal of bells. Their depressing notes reverberated endlessly in the skies, and the sound was enough to make one's heart tremble.

The noise shook me until my mind was completely blank. I looked stupidly at the courtyard full of grieving, sobbing people. Some had their faces ashen-white, shivering as they knelt on the ground.

"How audacious, who is this?"

"Move aside, move aside..."

A figure appeared by the entrance to the palace, raising his robes to hurry inside before bowing with two hands raised in the air, a small box nestled within them. "Your servant came too late, and deserves to die ten thousand deaths."

Someone else trailed slowly in after him but stilled his steps to look astonished upon the scene. Amidst the chaos, he was the only one who still had a calm and tranquil expression. No matter how tense the surrounding atmosphere was, he was always quiet and elegant.

"Fang Hua, you came too." Han Zichuan nodded lightly with a gentle smile. He finally turned around and slowly sat down, hands knocking lightly against the surface of a table. Gradually, the smile in his eyes faded as he focused on one person.

"Imperial Physician Nong?"

"Your guilty servant is here."

"These few days, father's illness had been improving, but why did he pass away so silently today?" his gentle tone seemed calm, but carried hints of an approaching storm. "I really want to hear the reasons behind this."

"The emperor's prescription was Lord Hua's formulas all along, and your servant was in charge of overseeing its decoction. Your servant left this afternoon to search for medicinal ingredients outside, and only hurried back now." His head hung as he bowed, though he shot Fang Hua a glance on the side.

What did Nongyu mean by these words?

He couldn't be trying to place the whole blame on...

I raised my head. The Fang Hua standing behind him now wore an aloof, indifferent expression. No, not indifferent, but more like he hadn't taken the matter to heart at all. His gaze swept over the assembled court ladies and eunuchs to settle on me. I gave a start, and my heart grew anxious.

This, he wasn't even aware of someone framing him! What was he doing, looking at me? Hurry up and say something, Nongyu's obviously trying to place the blame on you! My heart was restless with worry, and I grew agitated enough to stand up, only to have someone press me down

by the shoulders.

"Behave yourself."

Behave, behave. I'll behave myself.

Fang Hua's expression stilled as he looked at me, as if wanting to speak. Han Zichuan beckoned with his hand, not deigning to reply to Nongyu as he muttered to himself. His cold gaze pierced through the court eunuchs as he spoke in a stern voice. "Who was the imperial physician in charge of decocting the medicine today? Bring out the boiling water."

How efficient...

The people in the court really did things quick.

Before my knees had grown sore from kneeling, an honest and tolerant looking imperial physician, along with two or three eunuchs, were captured and brought before the imperial hall. They tested the boiling water with silver needles and dabbled a bit.

The elderly imperial physician held the needle between shaking fingers as he gave an experimental whiff before his face widened in astonishment. He spoke hoarsely, the voice filled with sorrow. "Your humble servant is incompetent, please allow Your Highness to dole out punishment...the decoction from this afternoon was personally brewed by your servant, but due to my negligence, someone managed to slip in some Broiled Spirit Incense."

"Broiled Spirit Incense?" Han Zichuan's eyes swept over him.

The elderly imperial physician was too frightened to utter another word.

Nongyu sucked in a breath, pushing the man aside to block him from view as he respectfully paid obeisance to the crown prince. "To answer Your Highness, this incense is made from the fresh juices secreted by the tender stalks of three unique plants. Using it increases the potency of a drug while causing hallucinations. An ordinary person can take it without trouble, but those with serious illnesses wouldn't be able to bear it."

I've heard of this thing before...

You had to add the stalks to the decoction a few seconds after plucking the stems, and ingest the results within 16 hours. The earlier the drug was taken, the more effective it would be.

"But for the imperial palace to hide a secret store of such incense, moreover one with such strength, suggests that a master of the medical arts had the fortunate timing to pluck a few plants from outside to create the item before throwing it within the decoction. Your Highness, please investigate thoroughly." Nongyu frowned, sniffing the hand that had dipped into the drug as he continued, "Of course, we can't leave out the eunuchs or court ladies, either."

Han Zichuan propped his head on his hands as he sat in his chair, pointing at the shaking forms of the honest-looking physician and his eunuchs. "Take them away and cut off their heads."

He seemed to be smiling, speaking such things concerning life and death as if it was nothing special. It didn't seem like he was ordering their heads cut off, but telling them to pull up some weeds instead.

"Your Highness, what should we do with the rest of these servants?" The court eunuch asked quietly from his position on the side, hands in his sleeves.

"Take them away for investigation, and check to see if any of them are hiding pills or medicines. Anyone who wasn't serving their masters, or left the palace halls, should be turned over to the Ministry of Justice for questioning via torture."

What...?

Your granny[1]! You're too cruel, Han Zichuan.

My body felt at a loss as I watched the guards move in to drag people away. Heart pounding, I blanked out, wondering whether I should rise against them...and rebel. Then a figure blocked my view and a voice spoke mildly, "I want to keep this young court lady."

I could dimly see the side of Fang Hua's face as he pressed his hands against my shoulders, hauling me off the ground. He softly but surely faced Han Zichuan and spoke, "She's always served at my side and never left me."

Nongyu was flabbergasted.

"Naturally, I won't touch any of your people," Han Zichuan smiled, his tone exceptionally easy.

I could clearly sense Fang Hua's grip lessen on my shoulders, and my body relaxed slightly. My eyes gazed at his face, which could dazzle and stun all lookers, and experienced a moment of distraction.

Why did he have to lie? If he was exposed, wouldn't it...?

Meanwhile, Nongyu had spent the entire time standing behind Han Zichuan. I couldn't see his expression, but recalling what he said to me...I seemed on the verge of realizing something. But I dared not think it. I didn't want to look into it, either.

The imperial palace really was a laughable place. My head hung as I occasionally cast glances at the shadows on the ground, before suddenly seizing up. I raised my head, astonished. The shadows on the splendid golden wall, the warm comfort of the colored glass lamps, and the silvery, reflected points of the bed-curtains, were all moving gently despite a lack of wind.

Shocked, I could even hear someone's extremely feeble breaths, struggling and weak, as if it was ready to stop mid-gasp at any time. The foundation of my internal energy wasn't weak, so my hearing was much keener than normal humans.

Was it possible that...the emperor hadn't died?

It wasn't impossible. Although the old man emperor's sickness was

severe, he had a chance of staving off the effects of Broil Spirit Incense. Perhaps his heart only stopped briefly, but if they treated him now, they could even save his life.

Suddenly, Fang Hua took a few steps forward as if intending to lift the bed-curtains. Han Zichuan's hand rested on his shoulder with a very easy smile, up until that weak breathing faded away...

Only then did he say softly, "Don't disturb the dead, or else it'll be seen as a sign of great disrespect."

I felt like I'd never seen him properly before.

The prince who had once been quick to modesty and tender gentleness...was still gentle now, and still smiled as he had in the past. But hidden beneath the warmth of his smile was something that made my hairs stand on end.

The court eunuch's respectful, solemn voice rang across the great hall, though his words still weren't enough to disguise his shrill, sharp tones. "The emperor has passed away and fifteen days on, the crown prince will ascend the throne. The childless concubines of the late emperor shall be buried with the deceased."

This was the 'vast and mighty' 'benevolence from the emperor'

Un...it really was vast and mighty. All the things the old man emperor had enjoyed in his life was being taken with him after death. In the midst of the crowds hailing for the new emperor's longevity[2], Fang Hua gave

the dead man a glance and turned to leave.

“Lord Hua, what’s wrong?” I hastily followed. He had a mild smile that was exceptionally chilly. I raised my eyebrows, spotting Han Zichuan standing by the door to the great hall, attentively watching the two of us depart with a tender smile.

Though his words were gentle and far away, they were still enough to make me tremble. “Strictly investigate the imperial physicians. Increase the guards looking after Lord Hua, and prohibit anyone from leaving the palace.”

[1] your granny (奶奶的) —nainaide, used as an exclamation of surprise/shock/disbelief, or as a curse.

[2] emperor’s longevity (万岁万岁万万岁) —wansui wansui wanwansui, the ever popular call from an emperor’s subjects, for him to live for 10,000 years, 10,000 years, 10,000 of 10,000 years...

Chapter 34*

The next day.

An imperial decree was issued, forcing Fang Hua out of the main hall and into a different residence. The new quarters were colder and much more cheerless, and the interiors were simple and unadorned, almost like...a Cold Palace[1]. There was nothing to gain from walking around, yet I refused to sit still, spending my days wandering about the palace and feeling stifled.

Fang Hua didn't seem to mind at all, but often leaned against the window, occasionally boiling a pot of scented tea to drink alone as if none of this had anything to do with him.

He still hadn't grasped the situation. The noble consort that had loved plants and flowers was presented with a length of white silk[2] and hung herself yesterday. Rumors had it that she was one of the late emperor's favorites, and cried for half the night embracing her only daughter before she died. Tongues wagged about this event all through the court. I was very familiar with that daughter...she was the one who once snuck into Fang Hua's rooms to cling onto him, disguised as a court lady named Little Huang.

When I thought of such a crafty little girl left to survive alone in the depths of this palace, I couldn't help but sweat in her place. But with things as they were now...what else could be done? There was nothing left but the sense of self-preservation.

Han Zichuan at least recognized old ties of affection. Amongst the

eunuchs and court ladies sentenced to prison interrogations, all those who served Fang Hua were returned to him unharmed. The palace was originally a place for talk, and in this way rumors and slanders were spread around. There were many theories, but all of them leaned towards one point. The death of the previous emperor claimed many other lives, even those of insignificant people. Yet Fang Hua remained completely safe, making it clear that...all monarchs under Heaven had difficulties resisting the trials of a beauty[3].

I dug a finger in my ear.

Their topics for gossip really stuck out from the rest.

Fang Hua might have been beautiful, but he was still male. Those using such words to smear him had to be recorded in my notebook...I'd settle accounts with each and every one of them later. Heheh, and I was just thinking the days were getting so boring with nothing else to do.

Thus, I spent every day strolling around with packets of poisoned powders, occasionally scattering them in the wind...stirring up pandemonium in this pure land until I got addicted to my tricks.

And so...looks like I missed dinner again today.

I went back to my residence, stomach grumbling with hunger. I could see the bright lamplights shining from the shabby old windows. On a typical day, it was rare to light lamps at this hour because after we moved into the cold palace we were never distributed enough candles. Today...what had happened?

Could it be that we had an honorable guest?

I thought it was strange, and leaned towards the window to make a hole in the paper covering. Before I could do so, Little Li grabbed my hand and pulled me far away. I rubbed my shoulder and grumbled. "What are you doing, using so much strength?"

"Where did you run off to all day?"

"What happened?"

"After Lord Hua returned, he searched for you for half the day. How could a so-called servant who's 'always served at his side' and 'never left him' toss aside her master without a thought?"

Could I say I went out to punish the wicked and eliminate evil?

How embarrassing that'd be. I fell silent, twisting my robes in my hands. When I looked up, my voice was slow and leisurely. "So what if I didn't come back? At least let me enter the rooms and serve him."

"Lord Hua and the crown prince are currently drinking inside. I heard it was excellent wine brought from his old home, and they've been at it for quite a while."

Why did I smell the stench of adultery?

How could Han Zichuan have enough spare time to come here...?

However, he probably won't cause difficulties for Fang Hua. I narrowed my eyes and looked at the tightly closed door, then walked back and forth a few times, before plopping my butt on a stone bench and raising my back. "Is there anything left to eat?"

"I've just taken away a few plates of cold dishes that went with the wine. You wait and I'll get some for you."

A small plate of shelled peanuts, next to some thin slices of meat and even some juicy cuts of venison appeared. I was stunned by the sight.

"Can Lord Hua eat these things?"

"He can't, so the crown prince tasted it two or three times before telling someone to take it away."

My hand picked up the chopsticks, feeling a sense of reverence and awe... These were things that masters ate, and they were now left for me. It felt like I was breaking a rule somewhere.

"Originally, the crown prince wanted to eat more, but Lord Hua told someone to pick them up, saying he was leaving it for a hungry ghost..." Little Li covered his face and glanced at me as he laughed into his sleeve.

"Do we still have mantou?"

"Yes, yes, you wait a bit."

Hungry ghost...

Was he talking about me?

Che, have there been any ghosts as good-looking as me? He really had no taste. My foot rested on the stone bench as I tore the meat with my hands and ate them chunk by chunk. It was tasty enough to make me want to eat my own fingers.

Suddenly, the door to the rooms creaked open. A figure in brilliant yellow robes staggered out, body swaying.

"I'm going to the lavatory, don't hold me back."

"Please, it's this way..."

The small eunuch at his side kept his figure bowed respectfully, occasionally offering a hand to support the crown prince in fear of him falling. I clicked my tongue, now this was a piece of work.

After the bustle died down, the courtyard grew much more quiet. I slowly strolled over to take a look and saw the door wide open. Stuffy air wafted out from the room, mixed with the sweet, sharp scent of wine. An overturned chair laid on the ground, surrounded by scattered peanut shells and broken porcelain.

A few court ladies were wiping the floors with rough cloths, shaking with fear as they cast frequent glances at Fang Hua, who was sprawled across the table. They were probably afraid that he'd wake up...

Fang Hua's room wasn't a place where anyone could enter and exit freely.

I quietly entered the rooms and gave the court ladies a meaningful glance. Their faces lit up in smiles and grateful looks as they rose to bend forwards and back out of the house, not even forgetting to close the door behind them.

Shutting the door...what did they do that for?

—

I stared at the tightly closed door and couldn't help laughing in spite of myself. Although Fang Hua's moral character turned questionable after getting drunk, it wasn't so bad that people had to avoid him for fear of repercussions. Actually, I quite liked him when he was intoxicated. At least he wasn't cold and chilly like usual.

Speaking of which...how much did he drink this time?

I looked around until I saw a familiar jug by his side on table, inlaid with dark-blue lines. Frowning, I lightly touched his shoulder and got no reaction. Fang Hua was now drunk to the point that he was lying senseless on the table.

I had no words to say for Nongyu...

The old Wutong tree had three jugs buried beneath it, and yet he selected the largest one to bring back. This one had enough wine for yifu to drink for a year. He really dissipated the family fortunes this time.

Wait, it couldn't be...

My hands slipped into my sleeves as I took a step back, peeking into the jug.

Geez...

As expected, I could even see the bottom of the jug! Though this nectar wine wasn't any stronger than the ordinary variety, it was still extremely intoxicating...getting this drunk took effort, and this single jug of wine had used up three years of my preparation time. I clicked my tongue and couldn't resist peering at the empty jug again. They actually emptied the entire thing. Zichuan and him had quite the ability; admirable, admirable.

I shifted my gaze and spoke softly, "If you sleep here at night, you'll catch a chill. How about your servant supports you to bed?"

He remained sprawling without uttering a word.

"Lord Hua?"

No reaction.

"Fang Hua?"

I was completely ignored.

I cleared my throat, pinching my voice box to lower the pitch of this (faked) clear and melodious voice. "Yifu, come back to rest in the rooms."

His head was lying sideways on the table, and his body looked like it had solidified in place. But the folds of his robes rustled a bit. Finally, he reached out a hand and raised himself above the table to look around, eyes sweeping the scene before throwing himself into empty air.

"Good Shao'er, bring me another flask of wine."

His tone was filled with tender feelings, the last word arching up in pitch. Hearing it made a person both limp and numb. In the end, he fell into a dead sleep and didn't move again.

He was definitely drunk.

I relented in a moment of weakness and pulled a chair over to sit down and quietly look at him. His temper hadn't changed. He still liked to order people around regardless of whether or not he was intoxicated. The pale yellow candlelight flickered incessantly. I stood up to stuff the cracks in the paper-covered windows with a cloth, before dusting off my hands. Looking down, I was surprised.

Fang Hua had buried half his face in his sleeves, his white, jade-like features flushed with wine. There was a conflicted tilt to his eyebrows... This guy, he was as pretty as uncut jade, his entire form shrouded in the

warm glow of lamplight. His pitch-black hair cascaded like waterfalls to glow softly, enough to drive me silly to see.

I stroked his hair, feeling the slippery coolness like water, and was reluctant to let it go. His eyebrows were still knitted together, as if he was having a bad dream. My heart sighed.

Why suffer...?

To come here and endure these hardships, yifu, when I'd much rather you were home with me together, forever and ever.

He looked extremely meek as he sprawled on the table, letting me touch him as I'd like. His body was relaxed and his eyes closed as if sunk in a deep dream. Looking at his face inch by inch, my heart began to soften.

You should know that Shao'er has always been watching over you.

Yifu.

You said that the jianghu was leisurely and carefree, so let's not mix in the muddy waters of court life. When we leave the palace, Shao'er will accompany you and make a living wandering from place to place.

He didn't reply. Eyes closed, he looked beautiful with his elegant, tranquil features, though his forehead was knitted in worry. Why was the teardrop mole beneath his eye so distinct...? I touched him, but my heart was filled with bitter pain.

That mole looked like an actual teardrop, a dark red teardrop, enough to make my chest hurt with feelings of dim depression. Fang Hua said he had to do what he didn't want for a certain person. Thus, he pretended to throw me away and enter the palace.

He should know that I'd do the same—or even more—for my beloved without considering the consequences.

Fang Hua, you should know the depth of my feelings by now.

He didn't speak, but remained on the table, long robes exuding the dense scent of sweet wine. His face was still calm, as if cut off from the cares of the world. Those eyelashes covered his eyes, leaving nothing behind but an apathetic chill.

I reached out a hand and tenderly caressed his face, as if captivated. My body bent forward, one hand bracing against my chair as I gazed at him while holding my breath. I trembled involuntarily, and lowered my head to kiss his lips.

Slender strands of black hair fell in torrents across my body.

I tasted the pure, sweet flavor of wine on his lips as he suddenly gave a jerk. I assumed he reacted from instinct, and gave him a bit of distance before staring at him tenderly. He was half-lying on his sleeve, eyelashes trembling minutely over his glimmering, drunken irises. The gleaming light reflected in his eyes rivaled that of candle flames as he calmly looked at me with a small, gentle smile.

I stood stunned, and my chair toppled to the side as I fell on the ground, thoroughly frightened.

H....h-h-he....

When did he wake up?!

He moved closer, eyes shining like blurry moonlight reflected in a disordered pond. They had a brilliant, misty quality to them, and squinted as if trying to see me more clearly. I used my sleeves to cover my mouth, looking at him in a panic as my face heated up. My steps retreated and I only wanted to dig myself in a hole somewhere.

Fang Hua's entire body swayed before falling over, burying me beneath him. A delicate fragrance mixed with the intoxicating scent of alcohol rolled over and stunned me. I didn't know whether I should hold onto him, or push him away. He reached out a hand and took my head into his embrace, his whispered voice quivering with complex emotions.

"You...were finally willing to come back."

Ah?

What did he say?

I looked directly at him, swallowing as I replied in a small voice. "I never went very far. I was right outside before."

He smiled gently and used a hand to stroke my face, dimly gazing at me. His expression seemed hazy, as if the wind had clouded his thoughts. Being looked at like this from him made my heart pound, and my whole body grew hot. The places where he'd touched me felt as they'd been scalded.

Holding my face, he lowered his eyes to sweep his gaze past me. Uncertainly, I followed his line to vision and saw...a certain gap that almost gave me a nosebleed.

The support I'd gotten from the wall slowly gave way as the other person leaned over me. My body was very stiff...and a ticklish laugh crept past my ear. It was immediately followed by a sweet scent as someone caught my chest in a warm embrace. His half-sober eyes gazed at me with a tender strength as if he was hugging a precious treasure.

My eyes suddenly widened.

A pair of burning lips touched mine like an inexperienced youth's, and his tongue gently brushed apart my lips. Our two silhouettes reflected in the candle flames seemed like they were about to combine into one, and the scene was soft and warm. I only felt my mind go stark white, stunned and bewildered by the turn of events.

Wait...

What was going on here?

I stole a kiss from him and was caught red-handed, yet the Fang Hua who hated touching people was not only embracing me, but...

My lips turned a bit numb, though my face was burning and my heart beating hard enough to burst out of my chest. Right now, my head felt giddy. I was just about drunk off the intoxicating alcohol fumes wafting off his body.

About seventy to eighty percent of his body weight pressed against mine, a familiar warmth that drove me crazy from missing him. To be crushed like this felt a bit inappropriate, so I gave him a light push and crawled away. He turned over and hastily grabbed my sleeve, slowly lifting his eyes to look at me in a mix of laziness and fatigue. The red birthmark by his eyes was like a teardrop, but his expression was soft, and his grip tightened to hold me still.

"Don't leave..."

He didn't push me away anymore.

This time, he was telling me not to leave.

I didn't know how much of him was sober or drunk. I didn't know who he saw beyond this face mask of mine...

I only knew that the emotions coming from his gaze now was something I'd never seen before.

So even Fang Hua could love a person.

So even he...could wear such an emotional expression.

I gently rested my hand on his shoulders, my voice growing firmer as well. "I wouldn't go anywhere unless it was worthwhile."

He leaned over, staring hazily as his hand pointed with wavering motions. When he squinted, it seemed as if he was trying to focus on the person before him, before giving up without a smile to encircle my shoulders. "You can't lie to me..."

I smiled and gave a noise of agreement.

He assumed a dependent position to lean over, smiling lightly as his head vaguely rubbed against me again and again. Suddenly, he fell onto me completely and buried his head into my neck, not moving.

His breaths grow long and level... finally he'd gotten drunk to the point of knocking out.

This time he really acted out for a long time...

Still, even his sleeping self had a certain lovely charm. I abandoned my facilities and held him until I grew tired. The wind beat against the paper windows, making them creak. From outside came the faint noise of staggering footsteps.

"Fang Hua, I'm back." Abruptly, a voice shattered the serenity of the

room.

The door opened with a bang, and a single person barged in, the lingering sound of his laughter stopping with a grunt. "It was really tiring holding it in, but now I feel better...let's drink another jug, we won't stop until we're drunk."

My body stiffened, and the hand embracing Fang Hua slackened for quite a bit. The other was wearing brilliant yellow robes, but stood on his own. He seemed to be sobering up as he looked at me in astonishment.

How did I forget that Han Zichuan and Fang Hua had been enjoying drinks together all night?

He'd only gone to relieve himself, and now he was back...

Was Fang Hua waiting for him?

So what did that kiss from before mean?

I couldn't bow fast enough, one hand supporting Fang Hua as I bit my teeth before that stare. It took strenuous effort to put Fang Hua to bed. I didn't even take the time to take off his boots before pulling the bedcovers over him.

My heart was already in a mess.

Han Zichuan watched motionlessly as if his sharp gaze could see

through me. Under such pressure, I gave him a deferential bow and said in a low voice, "Lord Hua is already hopelessly drunk. If the crown prince wishes to chat with Lord Hua again, your servant will leave immediately and prepare some soup to help sober him up."

He waved his hand to dismiss me with a blank stare, body swaying as he walked to sit down by the bed and lean over for a look. His voice was not very loud, but enough for me to hear clearly. "Didn't you say you would wait for me? Why did you knock out first?"

A chill stole over half of my heart.

A desolate moon hung high in the skies. The night breeze also carried a coolness that reached to the bones.

Taking a deep breath, I backed away, only sparing a single glance inside. I told myself not to think too much and ran down the steps, calling a young eunuch to tell Nongyu to make two bowls of soup for sobering up.

*Please note that the web version of this chapter originally had no title.

[1] cold palace (冷宫) —lenggong, a place where the emperor typically banished disfavored queens and concubines, significantly less grand (and less well-kept) than the rest of the palace.

[2] white silk (白绢) —baijuan, since it wasn't proper to execute royalty/the emperor's family, disfavored or unlucky concubines were

presented these silks as a tacit command to commit suicide and end their own lives. Hanging was the most common method, though poison also existed. Being presented a length of white silk was akin to a death sentence.

[3] trials of a beauty (美人关) —meirenguan, the sort of tests/temptation any ruler might face at the sight of a beautiful woman (or Beast). Rulers lured in by beauties frequently treated them well and indulged their whims. Sometimes they were planted by enemy rulers to aid in the downfall of rival kingdoms.

Chapter 35: Departure

Taking a deep breath, I backed away, only sparing a single glance inside. I told myself not to think too much and ran down the steps, calling a young eunuch to tell Nongyu to make two bowls of soup for sobering up.

The candles of the the Cold Palace had all been reserved for the main house.

Pitch-darkness covered the courtyard, but someone was quietly giving orders before everyone scattered to busy themselves with their tasks. Their footsteps were very light, and the soles of their shoes exceptionally soft, so that there was no sound when they walked.

My feet felt a little wooden, and my legs rather stiff. I couldn't help casting backward glances at the room with every few steps. Thanks to the rising wind, the paper coverings on the windows were rattling with noise.

I stood for a while before sitting on a stone bench to space out. A hand propped up my head as I looked at the candlelit reflections of two figures against the windows. Though I knew these were only shadows, the flickering flames distorted their shapes and made them seem very intimate.

There was a thread of bitterness within my heart.

I suppressed my grief as a sudden warmth rose up to fill my eyes. My

sleeve roughly rubbed at my face as I stood up, feeling at a loss.

Yifu was mine.

He was Shao'er's Fang Hua.

My hands clenched, but the stuffy feeling in my chest remained.

"The soup was prepared long beforehand by the imperial kitchens, shall we deliver them now?" Little Li asked as he walked over, carrying two bowls. His gaze settled on me in astonishment. I ignored him, staring fixedly at a point as coldness penetrated to the depths of my heart.

The shadows in the window seemed to draw closer and closer to each other, and the shabby paper covering rustled in the wind, enough for me to vaguely discern that person's brilliant yellow robes.

Only then did I notice someone pulling at my own clothes, and lose my concentration.

"What's happened with you?" Little Li gave me a rather caring look.

"Nothing." I turned away, my heart filled with agony. Though I wanted to grin, just trying to move my lips made my eyes grow hot.

"You were fine just awhile ago, but who provoked you now?" he said and stopped, glancing in the direction of the room before smiling mysteriously. "How fortunate, we don't even need to deliver the sober-up

soup this time.”

What happened?

Why did he say that...?

My body shook as I followed his gaze to the room. There were no more shadows in the window, only darkness...the lights had gone out inside. Abruptly, my mind grew blank.

I didn't think of anything, nor could I think of anything.

I only knew that Fang Hua and Han Zichuan were the only ones in that room. I don't know where my viciousness came from, but I suddenly lost my head and seized the soup from Little Li's hands, valiantly pushing him aside to charge inside.

“You can't go in, hey...little ancestor[1], why aren't you listening to what I say?” Little Li's voice grew smaller and smaller until he shrank back and retreated...because I'd already used three parts of my internal energy to push against the door with a creak until it opened. Without a lantern, the lighting in the room was very dim. However, the moonlight coming in from another window was enough to illuminate everything.

The table was empty besides a single jug of wine.

My vision swept past to see Han Zichuan leaning over to lie on the bed. A pair of hands looped around his neck to rest upon his shoulders, but I couldn't see the expression of the person beneath him...

My frame of mind now, how to put it...

It was indescribable.

It felt like a weight had rammed into my heart until I'd forgotten how to breathe. I didn't know when my hands started shaking, too weak to support something so heavy. An ear-piercing noise caught my attention from the floor, causing me to retreat a few steps.

Stunned, I realized just then that the soup bowls were cracked, and the floor was covered in porcelain fragments. The spilled soup was still surging across the floors, drenching my shoes and forcing me back like the sight before me. They both left me at my wit's end.

"Who told you to come in?" An angry voice filled with reproach came from the side of the bed, infused with a rare boldness.

"Your servant will leave as soon as she's cleared the mess."

I hurriedly knelt down. Strange, wasn't it, that something kept flowing uncontrollably from my eyes. I lowered my head and split my mouth into a grin, wiping my face with my sleeves as my heart shivered in pain.

"You..."

Han Zichuan kept his reclining position, lying over Fang Hua with a hand supporting his head. He seemed flabbergasted...a complicated

expression in his eyes as he prepared to get off the bed. "Come here, let me take a better look."

I stubbornly remained kneeling on the floor.

There was the sound of someone getting off the bed. I took a deep breath and crawled towards the door, my hands trembling as I prepared to rush out.

Someone firmly gripped me by the shoulder.

That person had monstrous strength, as if his fingers were digging into my flesh.

"Let go." I waved my hand and shook him off, but forgot that he was the crown prince. Before me, all the eunuchs were either kneeling or flat on their stomachs.

"I won't...I know it's you. Shao'er..."

Han Zichuan embraced me from behind, arms fastened tightly around my waist. My throat burned like fire, as if he was squeezing all the air from my lungs. Still, I kept up my stubborn struggling.

"I almost went with Nongyu back to our house in the forest to look for medicinal plants. But my spies told me the house was empty, and no one lived inside...you followed me back to the palace a long time ago, right?"

His face rubbed against me, the words pitiful and weak. "Why didn't you tell me?" In the end, he roughly turned me around and spoke word by word. "You should know how much I worried about you."

I stared at him with wide eyes. He was drunk to the point of expressing tender feelings, fingers unhurriedly brushing towards my face, my eyebrows...but I raised my brows and turned around, feeling extremely uncomfortable. Yet he forcefully resisted me with his hands, leaning over to look at my face.

"I should have realized early on that you changed your looks. Who taught you, was it Nongyu?"

I couldn't make out anything from his tone, but only felt...there were many things I couldn't grasp. All I could see was the image of him lying on Fang Hua, the latter holding him in his embrace.

"Your highness, please conduct yourself with dignity," The words were squeezed out from the gaps in my teeth. I didn't know how long I could bear it...

"Conduct myself with dignity?" he smiled brightly, his mouth filled with ridicule. "I'm going to be the only ruler of a country very soon. There's nothing I want that I can't have."

This person, where did he get such self-confidence?

I fixed him with a look. Exactly how much of him was drunk, and how much was sober?

"Ah, you..." his gaze shifted, and his hand rested on my throat. "You even fixed your voice...did you really want to avoid me? Yet you clearly got closer to Fang Hua, that really saddens me."

"You and my yifu, just what exactly..." The last few words were stuck in my throat and refused to come out. It was very difficult to speak them.

He raised his eyebrows and said nothing, but gave me a significant look. Using his hands, he clutched me in a full embrace.

"I can't say it, and also...I definitely can't tell you."

My body stiffened, vision filled with his frenetic, concealed gaze. He paused before adding something without rhyme or reason. "We've been together for so long, yet you didn't realize I liked you?"

Like me?

Like me to the point that you'd hug me...even as he said those words, he felt the hair on my temples with his fingers, pinching part of the skin...

My lips slowly curved up and I only thought it was very funny...as well as sad.

Yifu, is this the sort of person you like?

There was a slight noise. The unlocked door behind us opened with a

creak. I gave an astonished look behind Han Zichuan. Something brushed before my eyes, and my face suddenly grew cool. A face mask was lifted onto his fingers as Han Zichuan raised his eyebrows to give me a pleased look.

And yet I was completely fixated on the person behind him.

Beneath the vast and boundless moon, Fang Hua leaned by the door, his face at a complete loss. He was only wearing a simple, single layer of white robes as his gaze slowly drifted to Han Zichuan and me.

"Yifu," I called out hoarsely.

The two arms around my waist had never let go.

He strove to put on an expressionless face of surprise, but the hand pinching the front of his jacket was shaking. The mole by the corner of one eye looked as if it was about to slide down his face, glistening a scarlet red.

He was probably very sad.

Because at this moment, I could feel my heart twisting in pain like it would split open. So this was what they called a chill that pierced the liver and spleen.

He looked at me with a trace of a gentle, peaceful smile. A pair of twinkling pupils, pure and limpid as spring water, made a captivating sight. Yet to me, they only seemed like a source of endless sorrow. His

outwardly mournfulness increased.

I suddenly felt listless and empty.

Han Zichuan lowered his head while hugging me. Between the confusion and shock, the shattered mess of the past flashed before me like a dreamscape.

"Shao Hua, I know you."

"Shao Hua, I'll be living here now with you and Fang Hua."

That day the willow catkins were swirling in the air and Han Zichuan charged into our lives without warning. Was now a time to settle everything...? Perhaps this had been the truth from the beginning, but I had refused to believe it.

"Someone I used to know very well once fell in love with a person unable to return his feelings. The person he loved already had a wife, but he was still attracted to that person like a moth to a flame. The second half of his life was spent in grief so heavy that he wished he was dead..."

Han Zichuan had his head lowered to play the qin. Behind him stood Fang Hua, instructing him with his fingers.

The sunlight seeped past the bamboo woods to shine upon them both, dazzling slightly. A fresh gale blew past, lifting their sashes in the air while flowers fell like rain.

All these scenes flashed through my mind's eye...

How could I have forgotten?

An aching sadness settled itself in my heart.

I'd never forgotten...I just didn't want to accept it.

I think...I was really tired. I softly covered Han Zichuan's hands and stiffly pushed him away to take a deep breath. My hands and feet had no support, and there was no hope for me to cling to. The secret anguish of my heart had become a vivid reality.

Yifu, you raised me.

Shao'er once promised that I'd risk my life to protect you...

As for now, if you can be happy, then I'll leave...

As long as you are happy.

My heart grew weary as my hands slackened, and I made a choice to turn and walk off without any hint of reluctance. From the beginning to end, I dared not look back towards that hazy, foggy white image of a figure. I relaxed my body and closed my eyes, afraid that if I saw...I wouldn't be able to bear leaving him.

There was only his voice by my ear. "Shao'er, if you think it's worthwhile, then don't come back."

A very, very long time afterwards, my heart would twitch whenever I recall these words, which kept me restless for a long time. Everything originated from a misunderstanding. Suppose I had turned around then, maybe things would have been different.

Sadly, there wasn't enough room for maybe in this world.

[1] little ancestor (小祖宗) —xiao zuzong, a respectful title to call one's senior in a family (or perhaps a family unit like this one).

Chapter 36: Carefree Idler

During the year of Qing[1], the sovereign passed away. The crown prince ascended to the throne and changed the name of the dynasty to Yao[2].

Emperor Han took charge over affairs of state and annulled the exorbitant taxes and levies. The country gained prosperity and military might, and he was praised as the brilliant ruler, though he expressed no wish to take in an empress or concubines. The loyal ministers of Emperor Han grew confused and remonstrated with him, but to no avail.

Five years later.

Everything grew peaceful.

There were sayings that because Han Zichuan had ascended the throne, the country was extremely peaceful, and its people able to live and work in contentment. However...within the jianghu, people's hearts trembled in fear at the mention of a certain qin player. At the same time, they took great delight in dwelling on his deeds over tea and meals.

This person wasn't particularly out of the ordinary.

In fact, nobody knew whether they were male or female. His face was always hidden by a chiffon cloth mask and he dressed like a man, but spoke like a woman. He was used to wandering about like drifting clouds and wild storks—free and unrestrained—and came and went without a

trace[3].

He only had one hobby, and that was to collect pretty, charming men. Every time he took a fancy to a young master, he'd sit down at the qin, those fingers playing a tune to stir one's very soul. His heavenly pieces lingered in the air long after a performance like a celestial melody descended to earth. Only after recovering their bearings would the listeners discovered he'd abducted another young lord.

Rumors had it...that when the leader of the martial arts circles vanished last year, the qin player was involved as well. They were three versions of the story.

1) One day, the leader was leisurely rowing a boat on the river and admiring the scenery of the mountains and waters. Just when he was sighing with feeling over his attractiveness, this top, unmatched martial arts expert under the earth...realized that there was no wife in the world who could match him in looks. He couldn't help but shed silent tears, feeling rather melancholy. No sooner had he thought than the pond waters billowed with the sweet, plaintive notes of a qin from the mountains. A fairy-like beauty came trippingly over the waters and gave him a shock. He fell in love at first sight and decided to spend the rest of his life at her side. Thus, she effortlessly seduced him and from then on, the martial arts circle leader disappeared.

2) One day, when the leader was resting in bed with his eyes closed, he heard the melody of a qin within his quarters. A highly-skilled figure broke through his windows late at night as a thief, and the two had a fierce battle indoors. The leader was no match for the intruder and was made captive by the notes of the qin. Thus, both him and his incomparable martial prowess vanished from the jianghu.

3) Before the leader became the head of the martial arts circles, he was deeply poisoned by a villainous scoundrel. Fortunately, a mysterious female rescued him. This woman became unforgettable in his memories, so much that he constantly thought of her all day and lost his appetite from melancholy yearning. On a certain day, he was severely shocked to see her masked, fairy-like form playing the qin for a handsome gentleman in the streets. Irritated, he shouted out, "Since you're here, why not come with me?"

Thus, he went to drag over the fairy-like beauty, jealously striking his arm towards the other gentleman. Yet one dodged while the other rose to block, resulting in an unsightly scene of tug-of-war. With no other choice, the masked beauty threw aside her qin and grabbed both men before stalking off.

After that, two figures disappeared from the world. One was the leader of the martial arts circles, the other a general's son from the previous dynasty who had been branded a lifelong criminal by the imperial court. His looks were handsome, and he had in possession a treasured map and many unique martial arts manuals. Sadly, he was too frail to practice the techniques himself, and couldn't talk because he was a mute.

As for the qin, which broke in half upon being flung to the ground...

Rumors say it was snatched away by the masses and a single fragment of its strings or wood could be sold for up to ten thousand gold taels.

But these are all rumors...

However, the qin playing expert gained Seven Princes[5] as followers. No one knew what they looked like, because no one could enter their house.

The First (Yi'er) spoke little but had ruthless business methods and was rich in accumulated properties.

Of the Second (Er'er) and Third (San'er), one was immune to hundreds of poisons while the other poisoned everyone on sight, making them two sides of the same jade.

Fourth (Si'er) was proficient in techniques of the Five Elements and naturally talented in the art of face-changing.

Fifth (Wu'er) was reportedly very ugly, but had unfathomable internal energy.

As for Sixth (Liu'er), he was as beautiful as Fifth was ugly, and his lightness technique[4] was incomparable. Unfortunately, he couldn't speak.

Seventh (Qi'er) was lively, energetic, and possessed a spirited intelligence. He was the only person the qin player had brought from back home and was the obvious favorite. Typically, he was the one who took charge of everything.

As for this qin playing expert, his courtesy name[6] was Zang (葬) and his given name[7] Hua (华). He self-professed to be carefree idler.

"Hey...has anyone seen my shoes? It's so early..." I jumped to my feet, feeling about as I searched before collapsing back onto my bed.

"Oh sure, it's very early," a youth dressed in gleaming yellow robes gracefully burst inside, smiling irresistibly. For some reason, my whole body felt a chill as he sat down and prepared to tuck me in. "You can almost make it for lunchtime. What made you think of getting up so early today?"

I tugged on the bedcovers, avoiding him as I feigned innocence with a lazy stretch.

"You wasted half the night yesterday at Ugly's[8] again, right?" So joking, he withdrew his other hand from behind his back, the long fingers waving a pair of shoes before my face. I gave him a mocking smile but involuntarily backed away, afraid to accept them.

He raised his eyebrows, a charming action very much like a certain person. Startled, my smile turned forced.

"Don't make trouble, Third. Master's slept for half the day, she must be hungry now that she's awake." A 17 to 18 year old young man closed the door as he entered. Rolling up his sleeves, he snatched the shoes from the yellow-robed youth and started to carefully inspect and feel the material, eyebrows knitted. Without a word, the man knelt down and clasped my feet, as if preparing to put on my shoes for me. I trembled and he raised a face to smile at me. "I've checked, he didn't put poison inside. With Second serving you, you can definitely feel at ease."

"His tricks were all taught by me, so how could he dare to poison me?"

Like I'd be afraid of him trying." I said, stating the plain truth.

Second, the youth in the yellow robes, sighed and glared at me. I shrank back, and he hung his head with a laugh. "Master, you're afraid of neither Heaven nor Earth...but how come you've become so timid since cultivating that art?"

—

"The《Carefree Recollection》has been cultivated to the seventh level, and my internal energy has almost thoroughly dispersed. Nowadays I'm always forgetting things. I'm afraid by the time I get to the eighth level, I'll even forget all of you. I need safeguards in case I'm accidentally caught by a trap and forget how to make an antidote."

"Only you would pick such a harmful practice to the internal energies," the Poison Prince said heatedly as he swiftly stood up. "If you don't want to fall into traps, then you shouldn't have cultivated it."

"Little Third, Master's body isn't well, so don't clash with her." Second placed a small heated pot^[9] on my knees before pulling the bedcovers over my legs. His voice was very low as he spoke with his head bowed. "It's not bad like this. At least, it's better than the endless days you spent ingesting the Scattering of Forgotten Sorrows."

Forgotten sorrows, forget my sorrows...

These words brought up hazy, faded events from the past. A pinkie picking through the Scattering of Forgotten Sorrows pills as I downed

them with alcohol in my stomach, was a scene of distant days.

My icy fingers warmed considerably next to the heated pot. Holding a headband in his hands, Second tied my hair up in the usual scholar's topknot (a bun atop the head), held in place by a plain and simple wooden hairstick.

Sunlight streamed from the windows to warm my body, making me comfortably sleepy. I'd obtained the 《Carefree Recollection》by chance, but now it was a necessity. To recollect, free from cares without worrying about the past...

As it turned out, the carefree part came from having no memories of anything from the start.

"The marital techniques manual that Sixth gave to Master is quite strange. Cultivating to the fifth level causes the internal energy to increase each passing day, but after level five, the energy recedes. Yet checking your pulse showed that you haven't deviated from your cultivation. I don't know whether this manual of Sixth's will harm Master's facilities, so maybe it's better if you quit." Second pushed aside his sleeves before handing me a warm towel.

I smiled as I unfolded the cloth and placed it over my face, so comfortable I gave a sigh. "Wouldn't giving up be a waste of my previous efforts? If I can break through the seventh level and get deep enough into the eighth, I'll recover both my internal energy and my memories. As long as you keep Little Third from trying anything on me before then, I'll rest easy."

"You..." As soon as I heard the exasperated tone, I knew it was the young Poison Prince. He always spoke clumsily when he was angry.

"Keep your distance, don't touch Master with your poisonous hands."

Through an opening in the towel, I could see the poisonous so-and-so's face flushing red with embarrassed rage and hate at his inability to speak properly. The corners of my lips turned up as I regained my confidence and heaved a sigh of relief. Removing the cloth, I carelessly wiped my face before throwing it aside. While the little Poison Prince glowered, I even extended my finger on purpose to raise up Little Second's face. "Precious darling, only you love me best."

Little Second gave a furtive grin, very used to me taking liberties.

This child. Even when he smiled, it was laden with grief, as if deliberately provoking my pity.

"Even since Master eliminated Second's personal enemies, my only thought has been to serve Master well," he raised his eyes and gave me a soft look filled with affectionate feeling. "Don't chase me away tonight, all right?"

"That won't do, won't do at all..."

My hand trembled and I instantly pulled back, only to see his pupils dim. But he quickly turned and grabbed his head, smiling awkwardly...

I met Second four years ago.

At that time, I never thought of saving him. The moment when he stood alone, wearing a simple robe and surrounded by a sea of fire, seemed very fearless. It was the people of the jianghu who had set the fire to kill him, but he kept smiling as usual. Even now, I can only vaguely describe his expression then. Looking back to that past makes my heart pound, but at the time I only thought him an exceptionally mesmerizing sight.

Before the fires could swallow him up, he used his final moment of clarity to fight back. I knew that if I ignored him then, I might regret it for a lifetime.

Because his mournful smile unexpectedly reminded me of Fang Hua.

Who would've known that after my rescue, I discovered he was the foster son of the Pill King? Rumors said before the Pill King died, he soaked his son in all sorts of medicines, making his body immune to hundreds of different poisons. Even his blood became something as precious as gold. If the late emperor's men had found him earlier and extracted that blood, then their ruler might have recovered seventy to eighty percent without Fang Hua's help at all.

—

I lightly stroked Second's hair. It was comforting, and made my palm itch. Amongst the others, he was the most obedient and the one who relied on me the most.

...only, he relied on me too much. I came back to my senses and sighed.

"Second, last time I told someone to bring me back some precious medicinal ingredients. You haven't soaked in a medicinal bath for so long, so there's a cart full of ingredients free for you to use... Half a jin[10] or even three jin is fine, you can bathe to your heart's content."

He smiled, and I stroked his face before looking up at the Poison Prince, whose attitude was respectful and solemn. "Don't wear yellow robes next time, Little Third. Looking at it vexes me."

The little Poison Prince gave me another glare before swinging his sleeves and barging out of the room. I bore it with a smile as that vulgar yellow again assaulted my eyes. Actually, these robes were probably the most suitable, proper clothes he'd worn in the past few years.

But...

Ever since five years ago, I started treating yellow as a distasteful color..

"Master, was it worth it to tease him? He's used to being frugal, so it's rare for him to order robes. This morning he wore it for the first time to stroll back and forth in front of your doors. He was waiting until noon on an empty stomach just so you could see him, but then you made him angry," Second muttered, "Who knows who he'll target next as a result? It'll be up to me to save them again."

"It's not that I don't want him to get more clothes. We're not short of

silver, so there's no need to save money." Moreover...wearing yellow from head to toe reminded me of a certain person.

Five years had passed, yet instead of forgetting the things I should, I remembered them clearer than ever.

[1] year of Qing (庆年) —qingnian, many emperors had different titles for the years of their reigning dynasties. This may be one of them. Qing by itself means "to celebrate, congratulate," or an "occasion for celebration."

[2] Yao (遥) —at the same time, many emperors selected names for their dynasties (which is where we get Qing, Yuan, Ming, Song, etc.). Yao by itself means "distant, remote, far."

[3] came and went without a trace (来无影, 去无踪) —laiwuying, quwuzong, the exact phrase here literally means "to come without a shadow, leave without a footprint".

[4] lightness technique (轻功) —qinggong, first used by Shao'er in chapter 12 to descend the cliffs, a technique that shifts the energy in a person's body to reduce their weight, thus allowing them to walk on water and air. A skilled practitioner can move lightly and swiftly.

[5] Seven Princes (七公子) —qigongzi, more interesting is how each of the members' nicknames are written as character/word/daxie versions of the numbers one through seven (一, 二, 三, 四, 五, 六, 七) as (壹, 貳, 叁, 肆, 伍, 陆, 柒) with an affectionate "er" (儿) at the end, much like

Shao'er. In pinyin, these numbers are written as Yi(1), Er(2), San(3), Si(4), Wu(5), Liu(6), Qi(7). For the ease of the readers, I will be using their English equivalents.

[6] courtesy name (字) —zi, also known as a style name, used by young men among their friends and people outside their family. The courtesy name Zang means "to bury, inter."

[7] given name (名) —ming, also known as a personal name (equivalent to an English "first name"). The given name Hua is the same one in Shao Hua. You can read more about the types & classifications of Chinese names [here](#) and [here](#).

[8] Ugly's (丑儿) —from Chou'er, nickname meaning ugly. Most likely referring to the Fifth of her Seven Princes, known for his unattractive looks.

[9] heated pot (暖炉) — nuanlu, or an ancient space heater. The closest approximation I could find is [this picture](#).

[10] jin (斤) —also called a catty, Chinese unit of weight equal to approximately 0.5kg.

Chapter 37

While I was lost in thought, Second had already opened the windows. The sunlight was dazzling and there was a refreshing breeze. I drew in a breath, rinsing my mouth out and washing my face before holding onto his shoulder for a lazy stretch. Then I opened the doors and prepared to go out.

"Wear another layer," Second hurriedly grabbed one of the bedcovers and tried to force it over my shoulders.

"No need, it's not cold today," I refused with my hands.

He furrowed his brows without a word to stare at me, eyes slipping down to my chest. I followed his gaze to make my own observations. What was he looking at? My development there was perfectly normal.

"Master shouldn't be wearing men's clothes at all," so saying, he unfolded a set of robes and shook them out three times. He used it to cover me from the back and added, "If outsiders see, it'd be bad."

I was frustrated.

Even a few extra layers wouldn't hide the truth of my female gender. Not to mention, everyone in this house was one of my people...

Then I laughed in spite of myself, he sure knew how to learn from

others. My finger casually rested beneath his chin and gave it a scratch. "Oh, Second, if you keep worrying over things like this, you're going to turn into my son."

His face turned completely red.

Draping my robes loosely over myself, I carelessly kicked open the door. As it turned out, I was greeted by chaos[1].

What did you call this...

Being bad at being good, but good at being bad?

Second had really made a good guess. Standing in the yard, I lifted my eyes to see a yellow-robed youth standing gracefully at a high point, raising his head to curse loudly.

"It's not like I'll kill you, so what are you running away for?" As he said this, he rolled up his sleeves and spat. "I refuse to believe that I can't poison you."

I heaved a sigh and accepted the cup of tea from Second, sipping in silence as I watched passively.

There was no need to say it. The little Poison Prince had clashed with the others in the house again. Even after staying by my side all these years, his explosive temper hadn't changed. Hence, now he was swearing as he ran haphazardly through the rooms.

Yet, the person evading him was very fast. It was hard to see his steps as he leapt on roofs and vaulted over walls, weaving in and out of the bamboo forest as pale pink blur.

Good.

Though Sixth's body was weak, exercising over the years had made his lightness technique better and better. I was full of interest as I tagged along to look, my long robe draped across my shoulders.

A sound floated up from the ground.

I quickly backtracked and looked down, flushed with shame. There was already a man paralyzed on the ground, his scar-covered face turning green with anger. It looked like he'd been poisoned and was now unable to move.

Yikes...

Did I step on him by accident?

I was alarmed, but after seeing who it was, I grew used to it. I inspected my surroundings before using my foot to nudge his clothes. "You're the only straightforward and honest one, you get tricked every time. That can't be easy." Finally, I squatted down, head bowed in submission as I thumped his knee. "Fifth...my poor Fifth, it's fine if you were born ugly, but I just treated you a bit last night and now you've been poisoned on your face again."

"Master, you're blocking me," Second clicked his tongue a few times.

"Oh," I stopped to wipe my face, reluctantly moving aside a few steps. There was a stone table nearby, with two people seated on low stools. Intrigued, I went over. "What are you guys playing?"

"Xiangqi," answered a rhythmic, sonorous voice. "We were just waiting for Second to finish serving you...so he could come...help treat Fifth's poison."

"Ah, Master woke up really early today. Wait...it's my turn, stop." a delicate and pretty young lord held his chess piece in the air, muttering indecisively. He couldn't seem to make up his mind, but the brown mole by his eye made him especially good-looking. I quietly moved over and took a glance, before pointing at a certain spot, my head turned towards the skies in a careless fashion.

He blinked, and it seemed as if the fog had cleared from his eyes. Glancing at me, he hesitated again before slowly lowering his piece. "I'll move from here to here."

"General!" A crystal-clear voice spat out the words. That handsome and spirited man sat in an extremely dignified fashion, smiling gently as he set down a piece without a hint of anger. "This time you lost two pieces of fine silver. Your total is nine losses, which converts with interest into 120 taels."

Ah...

When playing with such high stakes, be careful that you're not ruined.

His mouth stiffened as he collected the money, before turning to speak. "Ah, Little Fifth was poisoned with the Seven Scattering Emotions, so he can't be touched...but you..." he looked over at Second, who was currently taking Fifth's pulse, and paused. "Never mind, you've already touched him. Well, it's not like you fear poisons anyways. But poor Fifth will have to endure six more hours of pain now."

—

Good grief...did you purposely wait before bringing that up?

He probably saw me spending all that time in Fifth's room last night and wanted to punish him. As expected, the more beautiful a person was, the more sinister was their heart. I'm afraid no one else in the world could be beautiful and harmless like that person...

My thoughts strayed, and I felt a dull ache in my heart. My hands tightened as I focused on circulating my Qi to compose myself...

There was a hwaaaaa! Astonished, I looked to see someone wave their sleeves, the fabric floating whimsically. The chess pieces scattered off the board and tumbled to the ground.

"No more, I'm not playing, I've lost all my pay for the month," the delicate, pretty young lord with the mole waved his sleeves, digging inside before holding open the fabric for me to see. Exactly as he said...it

was completely empty. He probably noticed I was acting strange and got the idea to distract me. With a smile, he spoke. "It was all Master's fault that I carelessly spent my silver. How many face masks will I have to sell to recover the differences in costs?"

My heart turned warm as I interrupted, "Fourth, didn't you say last time that one face mask can sell for lots of money?"

"Those are human skin face masks..." he cast a sidelong glance at me. "Now that I'm with you, how could I dare tear off human skins? You can't get much from selling pig skin face masks."

Limpid pupils turned to peer at me again before he leaned with a whisper. "Since I'm broke, I'll eat and drink off you, all right?"

"Sure!"

His smile caused the tiny brown mole at the edge of his eyes to raise up. He was exceptionally handsome when he looked at me, making me happy enough to want to hug him in my arms. Unfortunately, it was hard to make a move with everyone else watching.

He struck while the iron was hot and scooted closer, adding in another line. "My bedcovers are a little thin. Originally I wanted to buy new ones with my winnings, but since you lost everything for me, you wouldn't mind if we share your bed tonight, right?"

"I don't mind..."

Suddenly, someone kicked my butt from behind, leaving me with a burning pain. My mind blanked out before I regained my bearings.

Wait a sec...

What did he say? Share a bed with me?!

—

My butt still hurt; it seemed like whoever kicked me went all out. I rubbed it a few times without betraying my feelings, and glanced sideways at the little Prince Mole. "It's only the ninth month, so how could the nights be chilly? Fourth, this is where you're wrong. I feed you and raised you and save your life...but you're still fixated on getting closer in vain hopes of sullyng your Master's purity."

He wore a shameless smile and stopped talking, though his eyes had the hidden bitterness of someone thwarted in love. Silently, he moved to sit on one side, though he couldn't resist raising a leg to kick me. Looks like little Prince Mole felt extremely depressed and wronged...

I had the sudden insight that something wasn't quite right, and uncertainly narrowed my eyes at the chess pieces. "You're so familiar with those obscure arts of the Five Elements. Something as simple as a board game shouldn't thwart you, and you even had me lose for you. Were you doing it on purpose..."

He was indignant. "Whatever, I don't care. Either you come to my room, or I go to yours." I was dumbfounded, but before I could reply, someone

else retorted with a shout.

"Exactly how do you think you're speaking to Master?"

Before the voice faded, its owner had raised his eyebrows at me. I hastily took the hint and lowered my head to reverently pour him a cup of tea. I then realized that wasn't right either, but by the time I looked up, he was already lifting the cup to drink.

What was this called...?

Servility.

I was born to serve others no matter how grand I looked, or how impressive my reputation was, or how I ridiculed my seven talented, unrivaled young princes. Who didn't know the suffering and distress behind my impressive image, oh my bitter life...ah, I didn't even get to say it...as a carefree idler of the jianghu, I was just an idle person they could boss around.

Though I'd saved some of their lives and grew familiar with the rest, I only discovered after returning home that it was easy to invite guests, but hard to send them off...all of them started dawdling around. Especially this guy, the oldest. Though he wasn't the earliest one to enter these doors, he insisted on being called First.

Originally, I thought he had some status in the martial arts circles, at least enough to become their leader. If I hadn't cured his poison in the past, he might not have let me off so easily. I thought saving him was just

as simple as that... As it turned out, he had a good heart, and followed me with his sword for a hundred and eight thousand li[2] to repay his debt of gratitude.

But in order to conceal his identity the past few years, his martial arts skills became less and less outstanding. Fortunately, the so-called Prince Mole, Little Fourth, did a divination and suggested he go into business. Nobody foresaw that the silver would come pouring in afterwards. Nowadays, he paid off all expenses in the house. In short, he came to repay me but ended up getting paid instead.

Although we had lots of people in this house, our lives were pretty satisfactory. I didn't speak of statutes so we lived rather casually. They all said I couldn't tell good from bad...

What did they mean by 'good and bad'?

I really had no idea.

"What are you thinking about?" a certain person behind me raised his foot again and gave me a ruthless kick, though it was lighter than before. "Everyone's been waiting for you to wake up...it's time to eat."

I made a noise of agreement.

He brushed my shoulders as he walked past, the clothes swinging with a steady rhythm. This guy really was worthy of being called First with an imposing manner like that. I couldn't imitate that air even if I cultivated for 800 years.

My mouth opened and closed as I scuttled after him.

—

There was a round table with seven seats. After everyone sat down, two were still empty, so I counted First, Second, Fourth, Fifth...yikes, Little Fifth's complexion still looked terrible, he must have been heavily poisoned.

The dishes arrived, nine plates of delicate meats and vegetables all properly arranged, as well as a big bowl of soup with spots of oil floating on the surface[3]. I stretched my neck to look outside, feeling so hungry...

Were they going to eat or not?

"TIME TO EAT!" I raised my internal energy and roared.

The bamboo leaves shuddered in the absence of wind, revealing the pale pink silhouette intermittently weaving back and forth through the air. He was agile and quick, holding onto a bamboo branch as he looked at us from far away with a wretched expression.

"Come down, come down. Get down here if you have any guts," a figure dressed in yellow robes stuck his hands on his waist, stomping his feet. He had a crafty gaze in his eyes as he looked up, poisonous powders in his hands.

Just like an affectionate lover.

I almost couldn't bear disturbing their time together.

"Eat," the oldest ordered angrily.

Maybe his voice hadn't been loud enough, but he had always been a man of action. Slowly, he raised the chopsticks in his hands and snapped them without so much as a blink. Then he waved his sleeves in a whoosh of wind.

Those two broken chopstick halves were ruthlessly quick and accurate. They shot powerfully through the bamboo grove and into the wetlands beyond, missing the two people there by millimeters.

No wonder he was a martial arts expert...

There was nothing ambiguous about his actions at all.

In the twinkling of an eye, a wind surged in from outdoors and rattled the table. Very shortly, all seven chairs of the table were filled, and everyone started pouring wine and picking vegetables as if nothing had happened at all. No one minded while I held the heaving form of the pink-robed youth in my arms, his flushed face even brighter than the peach blossoms. Distressed, I fussily used my sleeve to wipe the sweat from his brow.

"Come, eat a piece of rabbit, it'll strengthen your legs," I encouraged him.

Without fail, he obediently picked up his chopsticks and gave a piece to the little Poison Prince.

All right...now the Poison Prince was angry enough to have fire flaming from his eyes.

I've got to say...if he can't catch up to you, then that's that. To actually use these chopsticks to mock him wasn't just being heartless and unfair, it was dragging me into danger as well.

I lowered my head to blow on the soup, cooling it. Then I drank it with gusto, not daring to stray my vision a bit. Suddenly, little Fourth Prince Mole raised his head, as if listening in rapt attention. His words came out of the blue. "Master, someone's come to visit."

I spat out a mouthful of soup, hastily wiping my mouth with my sleeves.

Curses, who came to call during mealtimes? This was obviously someone who wanted a free meal. I quickly stood up to look, though I couldn't see anything: only a small, thin sound reached my ears, like wind or something else altogether. Immediately, the sound grew louder, creating a noisy ruckus in the bamboo woods beyond. The green leaves rustled against each other, accompanied by the faint sound of bells and flutes.

I took the time to collect myself. Someone had broken through the spell formation Little Fourth set outside our borders and entered our territory.

[1] chaos (鸡飞狗跳) —jifei goutiao, the Chinese idiom literally means “flying chickens and jumping dogs.”

[2] a hundred and eight thousand li (十万八千里) —shiwanbaqian li, not necessarily a literal distance, more of an idiom meaning a really, really long way.

[3] oil floating on the surface (上面飘着油花儿) —shangmian piao zhe youhua er, oil is an important part of Chinese cooking that adds flavor and taste; having a soup with oil in it also indicated a certain level of household wealth.

Chapter 38

Someone was forcing their way in?!

In my rush to stand up, I rammed against the table edge. This pain... was indescribable.

"Hurry up, what are you all spacing out for? Quick, give me a face mask."

Fourth Prince Mole held onto the table as he slowly stood up. "What's the rush? That Seven Steps Bamboo Array is enough to keep him wandering aimlessly for a while." Right as he finished, a noise shattered the silence of the forest, and the shrill notes of a flute tore through the skies.

"This person has a formidable foundation, what's going on? He broke through my formation so quickly." Little Fourth's face was all astonishment as he dug through his sleeves, finally pulling out an ash-colored pill. "The face masks are inside my rooms, but there might not be enough time to grab one. Eat this face-changing pill first."

I did as instructed.

Next, I shot a meaningful glance at the others while I opened my arms with a pout. Someone brought over a set of white robes and dressed me up. Without a mirror, I had to lean over the table and peer into the soup to check my appearance...of course, it couldn't reflect my looks at all.

I clutched my head. No matter how I looked at it, I still had the air of a woman. Little Fourth was holding a hairband as he undid my hair and tied it up again, hands and feet flying as he fiddled with the black strands. Grinning, I reached out to embrace him, receiving a wordless smile in return. My hands continued to rove up and down until he opened his sleeves and in that moment, I touched his cheek then jerked off his own face mask.

"Y...y-you, what are you doing?!" Looks like the delicate and pretty Prince Mole had his fits of temper, too.

"You've already concealed yourself in the jianghu for all these years. Others can't recognize you since you change your face daily, so lend me this mask for a bit. I'll return it to you afterwards." I quickly bent over and pressed it against my face, afraid that he'd steal it from me. He was angry, but had no choice but to smile helplessly.

Actually, everyone in the jianghu knew that the Elder of Mt. Tian had an outstanding disciple with impressive face-changing skills. The disciple also understood mystical techniques related to the Five Elements and Eight Trigrams. Very few people had seen him, but those who did had different descriptions of his looks. The common point between them all was that he was delicate and pretty, like a young lord. Few had seen his true face, or his pair of very seductive eyes...

His hair brushed against me and made me itch. Without that semi-transparent face mask, the mole by his eye was even more obvious. My chest tightened and I quickly looked away, heart pounding. It took me a while to calm down before I spoke. "You, oh you...you definitely have to hide a face like yours, it's even more attractive than mine."

Just when I was about to tease him more, First held me back, signaling outside with his eyes. Sunlight spilled over the bamboo groves as a man in a simple ash blue robe appeared before our room. He looked like a servant as he stood with an air of propriety.

"My Master wishes to invite the Carefree Idler for a meeting."

I pushed everyone aside, arranging my robes before languidly settling into a chair. A finger rested against my temples as I smiled. "As luck would have it, our Master left to wander the lands again."

He looked at me and steadily asked, "May I presume that your excellency is the rumored Seventh Prince?"

I rolled my eyes in thought before leaning over. "What, you need me? Is it possible that you want to invite me over if you can't invite my Master?"

Scattered laughter rang out about us.

They were used to seeing me stir up trouble, so none of them said a word. Two or three had actually left for the table, watching the drama unfold while eating lunch. I remember meeting each of them for the first time and being impressed by their noble bearing. As their years with me grew, their manners had turned far more crass. Yet despite being undisciplined, slack, and lax, each of them had learned how to truly live their lives.

The servant was neither haughty nor humble when he bowed. "My

Master said if I couldn't meet the Carefree Idler, then the Seventh Prince would do just as well, since there's no difference between the two."

One of the Princes in the back choked on tea and burst into a fit of coughing. I was very surprised...

Typically speaking, very few people in the jianghu knew of my disguise as the Seventh Prince. It was true that I'd only taken in six young men to help me in my daily life. Strangely enough, the reputation of the Carefree Idler had grown greatly. I liked sightseeing and amusements too much, so I'd disguise myself as one of the Princes to take care of collecting debts at home, or drinking in wine and rumors at teahouses.

It looked like this person was very familiar with my methods.

I carefully inspected the servant and discovered that although his head was bowed, his gaze kept wandering to Fourth Prince Mole at my side. Not only that...as a mere servant, he shouldn't have that sort of expression in his eyes.

I snorted.

Fourth smiled as he brushed past me to walk forward, resting a hand on the other's shoulder as he caught him in an embrace. "Martial brother[1], when did you show up? And why are you fooling my Master again?"

Martial brother?

Dark lines appeared on my face...

Sure enough, he tried to dodge, but Little Fourth caught him by the collar and wiped his face...to reveal an intimately familiar one.

Nongyu, you stubborn...

First set his teacup heavily on the table and spoke in a leisurely, unhurried tone. "What are you here for this time?"

I gave Nongyu an embarrassed glance. He didn't seem to mind at all, his eyes seemingly stuck on Little Fourth as he rested on the other's shoulders to pinch his face. He looked left and right before heaving a sigh. "You rascal, you wear masks so often that I've forgotten what you used to look like...the Elder of Mt. Tian gave you such good things to smear on your face."

"He's our Master, it's rude of you to address him that way," Fourth replied.

"I only studied under him for three years and never formally took him as my Master. I can't be counted as a disciple, and you don't need to call me martial brother." His smile gradually faded as he looked at me. "Shao'er, I have something to discuss with you."

Shao'er...

It was a name I rarely heard nowadays.

I dismissed the rest, leaving Nongyu standing by himself before the building. Our secluded surroundings were only interrupted by the occasional breeze, carrying over sweet breaths of air to mix with the scent of bamboo. It was a good place to linger over reminiscences of the past.

But things like this...how long would I still be able to remember them?

A small container of tea was slowly boiling on the simple stone table as the two of us sat silently. He rubbed the fabric on his legs, head lowered before he finally deigned to speak: "These past years, you've taken good care of my martial brother."

He might not have realized that I was familiar with his unconscious movements...there was something that had him ill-at-ease, something he wasn't sure how to tell me. I didn't call him out, but gave him a slow look. "Don't say such things, it's Fourth that's been taking care of me. Without him, I wouldn't have been able to maintain the identity of the Carefree Idler for so long in the jianghu without being discovered." I smiled lightly, then added, "I never knew his face-changing skills were even better than yours."

Thinking back, the crown prince had set an imperial decree to seal the capital after I left the palace. Guards were deployed to search all the inns, and even personal residences weren't spared...

At the time, I thought I had no place to hide. It was Nongyu who found

me first, and introduced me to the little Prince Mole from his sect. He was young and innocent, having just descended from the mountains. Despite his youth, he only used the time it took half an incense stick to burn to thoroughly remake me...into a shriveled, sickly, shrunken old woman over eighty years old. Even when the guards pulled at my face, sprinkled it with water, and rubbed it with oil, the mask held firm.

After our successful escape, I went with him to wander about the jianghu. The little Prince Mole had decided to stay with me. According to him, his master told him to gain experience off the mountain by learning about the jianghu world. He thought I was someone plagued with misfortune, so understanding me would help him understand this world as well. Recalling this, my face broke into a smile.

"Shao'er," Nongyu looked at me but remained silent, hands fiddling with the teacup as if he couldn't figure out how to speak. My line of vision slowly drifted down to rest on his elegant, slender fingers. They held the red sandalwood cup in a very attractive manner, each digit as smooth as jade. I imagined that they'd look just as graceful holding silver acupuncture needles.

Who knew how that person was doing nowadays?

The thought gave rise to bitter agony in my heart, and I looked away with a soft sigh. I was thinking too much of things I shouldn't today...

Much to my surprise, he came over to comfort me.

"You...do you still resent me?" that alluring, gentle voice seemed to be asking for a concession, the tone extremely soft.

"The tea's ready now, I'll pour you a cup."

"Shao'er...don't change the topic, all right? Let me finish speaking this time."

I raised my eyelids to look at him. Finish speaking? What else was there to say?

Say that he could have cured the late emperor's illness, but "carefully" gave him the wrong medicine?! Say that Broiled Spirit Incense was something he made, but put the blame wholly on Fang Hua? His whole 'of course, we can't leave out the eunuchs or court ladies, either', that implicated me as well?

All this I understood very well. I neither dared nor desired to think about it in detail, so why was he bringing it up again? Though...if he wanted to speak, I'd just listen. I smiled indifferently, hiding my thoughts as I turned to him. His mouth actually stiffened, as if he was still reluctant.

This person...

Whether he really meant me harm or had other designs, why did he risk saving me back then?

"Everything is as you've said. The late emperor's illness was treatable, but I held back on the ingredients for the pills to leave him in a state between life and death. To fulfill his filial duty to his father, the crown prince went to search for a cure outside the palace and slipped into your

lives.

Taking Fang Hua to the palace was another pretense. No matter how muddleheaded the emperor became, he knew that someone in the palace wanted to ruin him. But he couldn't do anything if he couldn't move or speak. Thus, the crown prince acted filial by personally waiting on him. Being able to bring back a highly-skilled, mythical doctor was enough to support his loyal image."

At the perfect place and time, the late emperor passed away. The crown prince ascended the throne and I loyally finished my duties."

He looked straight at me, moving past the objects on the table to tightly grasp my hand. "Shao'er, I never meant to harm you. I don't know what methods the crown prince used to bring Fang Hua into the palace, but everything was all for the good of the country[2]."

How hilarious.

What was a dynasty, a country? All I had was the jianghu.

Before that, my entire world revolved around a single house, but even that couldn't compare to my yifu who lived within it.

"Seems like I've really troubled you the past few years...how the late emperor died, whether by a subject that poisoned the ruler, or a son's affections for his father, were all matters of your imperial court."

He hesitated a short while before speaking again. "The emperor is

planning a grand wedding next year where he'll be matched with the daughter of a prominent official."

"Really." My mouth split into a grin. "Then congratulations to him. I've heard the emperor hasn't accepted imperial concubines for a long time. If he doesn't get married soon, I'm afraid his line will be broken before his grandsons."

He seemed to be angry. I smiled until my face was numb. When he mentioned Han Zichuan, I would inadvertently think of someone else as well. Those wild thoughts would only make me bitter, but I still asked in a low voice, "Is that person doing well?"

He paused, as if realizing who I meant. "I haven't been an imperial physician for years, so I don't know any more matters regarding the inner court."

"Oh. Is that so..." I lowered my eye in consideration. "I never heard you mention that."

"I was promoted after the crown prince ascended the throne," he gave me a deep look as he pointed out this fact, "Otherwise, how could I have so much time for idle chatter? Do you still remember my proposal back then? 'I have vast holdings of fertile land and numerous residences. My accumulated properties aren't flimsy at all...'"

I smiled. The rest of the words should be, 'I have no parents nor siblings, and I've yet to marry. Do you want to give me some consideration,' right?

Back then, the valiant and heroic Nongyu who rode on his horse was a refined, tender lord that had fascinated countless admirers. All of that seemed very far away from me now. His words reminded me of the time I'd lived with Fang Hua. Though there was sweetness in the memory, it also brought about great agony. I could still recall everything with painful clarity.

He looked at me as the smile on the corners of his lips faded. "If you wanted a peaceful life, you should have found a quieter place and concealed your identity. Why hide in the jianghu and turn yourself into a household name? You should know the emperor's still looking for you, even now?"

"The two of them are living well together, why look for me...? I don't want them bothering me."

"Maybe he's in the wrong, but what about you? Why pick this kind of life where you do as you please?"

"Do as I please?" I looked at him and grinned. "I just don't like cold and cheerless rooms. I found people to play the qin, paint, and mix poisons with, and saved some lives here and there. Before I knew it, my house became a lively place." Though I was used to loneliness, now that things were bustling, I had no desire to go back. I gave a long exhale, speaking languidly, "When they all find wives and have children and grandchildren, this place will be even busier."

"Shao'er," his hands touched mine. "You're still missing a Seventh Prince here. I don't know if you'll let me fill in the spot."

You've always liked teasing me, but now you're suddenly so serious.

There was a distressed look in his eyes. Why was it like this? Everyone admired and envied me as the jianghu's Carefree Idler, yet he was looking at me with such an expression. How laughable. The wind blew gently, and I suddenly felt moisture gathering around my eyes, as if something was overflowing and trying to spill out. My heart was bitter beyond compare.

Abruptly, coughing sounded from beneath the pavilion. Whoever it was seemed on the verge of heaving up his lungs. Surprised, I grabbed the railings and peered over, seeing the young Poison Prince looking as if he'd caught the pair of us cheating. He casually flipped up and broke a willow branch to stick in his mouth, strolling to Nongyu's side.

"Lord Nongyu, our oldest said that all the guest rooms are full. Even if we piled up some firewood, that won't be enough to house a person. But if you insist on staying, you can sleep in the same room as me."

"There's no need, I purchased a property around here. I wanted to buy some things when I left the house and decided to drop by along the way." Nongyu bowed, leaning over to whisper in my ear before he walked past me. "Han Zichuan's gone crazy trying to find you these past years. You need to be careful."

Seized with shock, I gave him a complicated look. The young Poison Prince glanced between us and seemed to lose his temper. He snatched the willow branch from his mouth and waved it at Nongyu's retreating back. "How come he's moved here and dropping by along his way? He actually disguised himself so thoroughly to pay a call, it's obvious he came on purpose to take liberties with you, Master..."

His eyes swept past me before skidding to a stop, an uneasy tone creeping into his voice. "Master, what's wrong with you? Your face doesn't look so good..." I didn't know why either, but my mind had blanked out after Nongyu's parting lines.

"The emperor's gone on an inspection tour and he's coming over here."

With these words, what should have come wasn't coming, but what shouldn't have come had arrived...there was nowhere to hide.

[1] martial brother (师兄) —shixiong, title given to a fellow male disciple who shares the same master as the speaker. [2] country (江山) —jiangshang, Nongyu uses an euphemism for country here that literally means "rivers and mountains," which Shao'er then contrasts with jianghu, or "rivers and lakes."

Chapter 39

Evening came as bright lights illuminated the main hall.

All the handsome men had gathered together, some speaking in low voices. First was wiping clean his jade xiao[1] while his gaze came to rest on Fourth with a derisive smile. As it turned out, the young Fourth Prince Mole was currently filing his nails. On the side, Fifth held a sallow yellow book, staring intently as the light illuminated the scar on his face in savage focus.

"What do you think of my nails?" Fourth asked as he held them up to the lamp light, eyes squinting.

Fifth picked up his book and scooted away when Fourth spoke, keeping some distance between them. There was a fragrant scent in the air that mixed with the flicker of lampwicks and the sound of turning pages. I took a break and cleared my papers, taking a sip of tea before I spoke. "Little Sixth, come to my room today."

As soon as my words finished, their eyes all turned to me with hot gazes. Little Sixth seemed stupefied. I swallowed my saliva and changed my words. "Or I could go to yours instead."

One line was enough to cause one thousand waves. The young Poison Prince prepared to rise from the table, but was forced down by First. I stared at everyone. "What's wrong with you guys?"

Each one of them had complex expressions in their eyes, some shocked, some gleeful, some resentful or uncertain or expectant...

Che, they all had problems.

I grabbed the badly shaken Sixth's hand, squeezing past the crowd towards my private rooms. There was no time to study their expressions as they burst into a spell of discomfited whispers.

The door shut.

I rubbed my hands as I paced back and forth, finally perching by the window to look outside. After verifying the courtyard was empty, I released a breath and tightly shut the windows. Little Sixth looked cramped as he stood on one side, unsure of what he'd done wrong.

"Sit." He prepared to sit in a chair, but I hurriedly stopped him and pulled him towards the bed. "Don't, you'll catch a cold there."

His face was completely red, and his pale pink robes set off the skin more prettily than brightly-colored peach blossoms. I sat next to him and leaned close, turning his hands in mine as I smiled. "You've been here for a long time, right?"

He nodded.

I smiled, touching his shoulders and smoothing out his hair. His hair just was like him, tough but velvety smooth to the touch like something that could be hated and loved at the same time.

"Sixth..." My grinning face looked at him. "Let me see the 《Carefree Recollection》you copied for me again, okay?"

He widened his bright, beautiful eyes as if he didn't dare to believe me.

"Look, I've already cultivated to the seventh level and my internal energy's returned to the beginning tiers. As long as I can persist until the ninth, I'll reach a miraculous breakthrough in my skills."

His eyebrows knitted. I tugged on his shoulders but he turned away, shaking harder than ever.

"Are you afraid that technique is too strange and I'll have an accident while learning it?" I smiled, ridiculing him. "Or...are you afraid I'll forget everything in the end if I keep practicing, including you? Hey, you're not allowed to cry. If you don't hand it over, I'm going to do a full body search."

I smirked with my head on his shoulders, my hands preparing to frisk him. With his eyes red, he actually bit his lip and grabbed my hands, his face completely white. Though he couldn't talk, a dull, hoarse sound rose from his throat.

I knew that he really was frightened...

Frightened that I'd do exactly what he didn't want.

Although he wasn't very strong, he gripped my sleeves tightly, his face trying desperately to convey his feelings. He had long lost his ability of speech and couldn't express things very well, but I understood him completely...

The Carefree Recollection was like a legend. Few people had cultivated it successfully until the end, but many more had been mentally damaged and lost their lives. When I first started cultivating, it was to halt my days of taking medication to forget my sorrows, but now my motives were wholly different. I embraced him gently, patting his back as I spoke in a comforting whisper. "I know my limits, so just let me take a peek."

He not only refused to smile, but had a strained, serious expression.

Sighing, I stroked his hair. "Ah, when did you turn so stubborn? It's fine if it's just that, but you're now stingy as well."

His body shook as I held him tight, as if he was extremely uneasy. I wanted to say something, but stopped as my heart softened into knots.

Perhaps his worries were well-founded. Recently my memory was a lot worse than before, and my internal energy had diminished greatly without cause or reason. There wasn't much time left, though. I had to restore my body to its former state before Han Zichuan found me, or else I'd be at his mercy. The situation now was urgent, even though I had no guarantee of pushing through the eighth level and finishing the ninth.

All I had was a gamble. Risking everything was better than helplessly waiting for Han Zichuan's forces...

I smiled bitterly as I looked down. Sixth seemed to have calmed down from his explosive feelings before, and I stroked his hair again. "Sixth... before I learned about your past, I only happened to see you on the streets and liked you a lot. Coincidentally, you wanted to follow me as well. I never expected that your father was an admirable general. Though I don't have much skills, I can at least keep the imperial court from harassing you." My hand reached out to pat him again, and my voice softened. "If you don't want me to practice it, I won't force the issue."

In a very short time, he had begun to smile.

"You've always been the most clever of the Princes, so don't tell the rest what happened today, all right?" His hand clutched the front of his robes as he drew closer to give me a careful look, before resting his head on my shoulder. It was just a nod, but afraid that I didn't see, he nodded again a few more times. I smiled and held his face in my hands.

"I only regret not finding you sooner or else I might have saved your voice and had a chance to hear you speak..."

His eyes curved into a smile as he pulled on my clothes, eyelashes quivering as if trying to say he didn't mind.

"Sixth...I've run into some trouble, and I'm afraid you're the only one who can help me." I quietly gathered him into my arms, hands lightly running past his shoulders and neck to brush aside his clothes, digging my hands inside. He seemed to shiver slightly.

"Is it alright?"

He was very quiet as he lay by my chest, hands shaking minutely as he grasped my robes. I could feel his restlessness. I grinned and gave a forceful tug, loosening all his clothes so that they settled around his waist. Sucking in a deep breath, I quickly got off the bed to grab the candlestick holder by the table. Carefully, I sat down with its light in my hands.

Sixth seemed a little lost as he stared uncertainly my way, but I just pushed him down again. His clothes were spread messily across the bed and the contours of his figure were lovely. The light shone across his glossy, jade-like skin and revealed numerous things written across its surface. My fingers trembled as I held on...so it really was here.

"Curses, you really have secret martial arts manuals on your body? What's this thing on your right side, a map?"

His mood seemed to darken. Turning his head, he looked at me, his hands groping for the bedcovers to hide himself.

"Aiya, you're a guy, what're you afraid of? I'm not going to strip you...or did you want to go back on your word to help me?"

He blinked, as if unsure how to react. A face stared at me in a mixture of anger and impatience, and his gaze seemed almost ashamed...

Could it be...he thought I wanted to do this and that tonight with him? Seeing that he looked ready to flee, I stuck out two fingers and sealed his internal passageways[2], effectively freezing him in place. Then I gave a cough.

"Maybe I didn't explain myself clearly. My deadly foe's on his way here, so the only solution is to memorize the eighth and ninth levels of the Carefree Recollection and see if I'm lucky enough to break through and complete my cultivation. Don't worry...I won't look at the other manuals copied on your back."

He remained curled up, not moving an inch.

"If you want to take offense, now's the time. Anyways, I said I won't look."

He was absolutely still, still half bent over. His difficulties seemed hard to express in words. Of course, who could with their whole body immobile like that? They'd have to be an Immortal.

—

The night slowly wore on. There was a crescent moon in the skies. Many people were probably awake with this kind of chilly night.

Within a lady's chambers, a certain beautiful, charming male was half-bent in a rather ambiguous position. Next to him was a woman dressed as a man, holding a lamp as she bent over to stare at his exposed back. She seemed to be mumbling something under her breath as she gesticulated with her hands. A sleeve carefully shielded the lamplight to prevent wax from dripping on the man's body.

The secret treasure map drawn on his right side, the coveted gem of the entire imperial court and all the martial arts circles, was neatly

covered up a washcloth, courtesy of the woman.

Moonlight brightened as the night drew on...

The sun shone high in the skies.

Even wrapped in quilts, I could hear the dim sound of someone fiddling at the door and lock. The slight, subtle noise reached my ears as a continuous stream of sound. I groggily turned over and cracked my eyes open with effort.

Warm, bright sunlight shone on the bed. A purple gauze trailed to the ground as it covered a person's body, tracing out lovely contours in his shoulders and back. There was even the hint of fine, fair-skinned legs. His head was pillowed on his hands, and he seemed to be sleeping very soundly.

I suddenly widened my eyes. Why was Sixth in my room, and why was he lying here after being stripped so thoroughly? I rose up with a few yawns before seeing my clothes all intact, and calmed down. Nabbing a pillow, I raised my foot to kick him off the bed. A few kicks later, I realized something wasn't right...

When I convinced myself he was actually human and not a block of wood, shock ran through me. Curiosity finally won over, and I scooted closer to poke him with a finger.

My eyebrows rose. He looked pretty comfortable sleeping there, but why was his body so tense? I touched a few places, hands wavering over

his creamy skin. His muscles were as stiff as a rock, and his skin was extremely pale as if something had stopped his bloodflow.

Someone sealed his passageways?!

Wait...let me think. This guy was right next to me, yet someone managed to seal him. What exactly happened last night?!

I squinted, hugging my pillow to my chest as I rolled around to ponder. Listless and half-awake, I could only feel my dantian[3] swirling outwards to gather energy towards my head, making me limp and numb. This feeling typically only came after I finished practicing the Carefree Recollection, a cultivation method that worsened the memory the more I cultivated...could it be that again, I had...?

Hold on, now I remember. Last night I forced Little Sixth to take off his clothes and paralyzed him so I could study the techniques...and then... and then what?

—

Did I forget to un-paralyze him?!

Was he huddled up in the gauze like this all night?

This child...it's not like I paralyzed his voice, why didn't he remind me before I fell asleep...yah. I clutched my head as I remembered again, he couldn't speak...

Look at this memory of mine.

I hastily turned over and clapped him on the back before unsealing his passageways. When I saw him knit his eyebrows in response, I relaxed and wrapped him in the covers. He was as cold as ice, last night must have been hard on him.

Suddenly, there was a cough before someone opened the doors from outside. Light footsteps wandered in, surprising me as I tried to get up, only to hit my head against the railings of the bed.

That hurt...

"Master, why are you..."

I yawned, tears gathering in my eyes as I spotted figures by the head of my bed.

"We've interrupted Master's joyous occasion," said a harsh and sarcastic[4] voice.

I grew wooden.

They looked at the sleeping Little Sixth on the bed, then at me, embracing him in my arms with the covers overturned. Graceful smiles that had been as brilliant as jade flowers immediately turned serious one by one.

"I told you we shouldn't have picked the lock right now, just look... Master hasn't gotten out of bed yet." Little Second stared at me with clear eyes, as if trying to guess how naked I was beneath my covers.

"How long do you plan to lie on him like that?! Is he that great?!" When I heard the explosive tone, I knew it was the young Poison Prince. If it wasn't for Fourth Prince Mole holding him back, he might have fed Little Sixth his Thousand Year Venomous Insect whole.

Sixth seemed oblivious to the threat as he clutched the covers tightly and turned over, still sleeping.

"Don't disturb Little Sixth, he must be exhausted," Fifth said in a depressed tone, in obvious low spirits.

At this point, a few uniform pair of eyes drifted to stared at me, who was still pretending to be asleep. I could feel the heat in their gazes move from my torso to my head...it was more uncomfortable than being made into a living pincushion.

First didn't say a word from beginning to end, but his face was like a board as he stalked over, hand gripping his jade xiao. I squeezed my eyes shut, preparing to brace myself in case he hit me. But the expected pain didn't come...

Instead, First lifted up my covers and glanced inside, before slowly calming down. Fortunately, I hadn't taken off any of my clothes yet. I quietly let out a breath.

In an instant, the Sixth lying on the pillow seemed to have awakened. He rubbed his eyes and sat up, looking at the figures gathered around us with no reaction. Wrapping the purple gauze of his inner robes about him, he prepared to get off the bed, but trembled as his foot lost feeling and he crashed to the ground, stunned.

This time he was fully awake, and turned back to give me a resentful glare. Then he grit his teeth, supported himself with the wall, and walked out. This early in the day, he probably wanted to go to the restroom. Seeing his back and legs shake as if he'd pulled some muscles...I think I probably paralyzed him for too long. Now his entire body was numb.

But the other Princes thought differently.

"Very good...he gained some ability." First tossed his sleeves and spoke icily. With that simple movement, the door that had closed behind them became riddled with cracks and burst into pieces on the ground.

He led the crowd of handsome men to storm out the door.

It was only the Fourth Prince Mole that kept looking back as he walked, repeatedly mouthing words as if to say, if you work too hard, it's easy to injure your body.

I had no reply for that.

I grabbed the robes draped over the folding screen and draped them over myself. Then I picked up a sword and went to the courtyard like an

autumn wind sweeping aside fallen leaves. A black shadow was conveniently hiding behind the bamboo to wait for me, his violet and green robes impossible to ignore. He was outwardly cold but inwardly passionate, and the colors he wore were hideous, as if he picked them on purpose to catch my eye...

In this world, there was only one person who would sacrifice himself to tarnish the vision of others, and that was the young Poison Prince.

What did he mean by turning back to find me now?

—

I stared in silent grief at the big mess of eye-catching colors as he walked towards me.

Pretending I didn't notice, I turned aside and thought of the mnemonics I'd read last night, lifting my sword and the qi in my feet to rise and dance amongst the bamboo. Five years had passed, and day by day throughout those years I'd soaked in medicinal baths to enhance my internal energy. My martial arts skills naturally ranked amongst the very best in the jianghu.

But after learning the Carefree Recollection, my body grew worse by the day and my internal energy had significantly diminished. In the past it was a piece of cake to leap on roofs and over walls, but now it consumed seventy percent of my strength. I didn't want to give up completely but had no idea when I could train past the seventh level.

To remember without sorrow, the Carefree Recollection.

This technique was extremely ruthless. My memory was far worse than before, but I couldn't forget the things I dearly wanted to forget. The events of the past seemed to have carved themselves into my bones and dissolved into my very blood. The qi in my chest tossed and turned before the sensation filled up my whole body. With my identity as the Carefree Idler, and my eloquence in lies and poisons, I feared no one. Not to mention, I had so many capable, interesting Princes at my side.

It was just that...

Nongyu's words would appear in my mind as soon as I grew distracted. Because if what he said was true, then...I cleared my mind, and lifted more qi from my dantian as I floated towards the bamboo. Han Zichuan was taking such great pains to look for me, but for what? So many years had passed but he still hadn't given up? Did he insist on making me see how close and intimate he was with Fang Hua...?

"Master, be careful!"

I gave a start, the voice like a cool spring flowing through my ears to banish the blankness in my mind. Reacting quickly, I withdrew my sword in a sweeping arc, the metal sending out a peal that sent leaves scattering across the entire bamboo grove. With one leg kneeling on the ground, I propped myself up and forcefully suppressed the true qi circulating wildly inside my body.

Someone hurriedly rushed towards me through the bamboo, wearing a pair of yellow shoes with purple and green robes. The different colors

were enough to make me nauseous, and I turned away, unwilling to look at him. He didn't notice, but focused on helping me up, his usual quarrelsome mood gone. "Master, what happened to you? Why won't you look at me?"

Not looking.

He grew impatient and cupped my face, trying to meet my eyes.

I hastily lowered my head.

He forcefully used a multilayered, multicolored sleeve to wipe away my sweat. I stared at a fixed point and backed away. Before I could take more than a few steps, my endurance reached its limit. I trembled and lurched forwards, spitting up a mouthful of blood.

"I told you not to wear yellow, but you don't need to ruin yourself. Dressing up like this to see me...how can I take it?!"

"I think I look pretty good in this."

Again, I couldn't hold back. Seeing his steps draw closer, I ruthlessly held him by the neck as I sprayed the front of his robes with another mouthful of vile qi and blood. My inner organs felt a lot better afterwards. He paid no attention to my body, but dully lifted the edge of his clothes and lamented, "My robes." His face looked as if it was hard to bear, but then his voice grew much softer. "Master, did you go astray in your cultivation?"

"Nothing so serious," I waved my hand, pulling myself up with the bamboo. Good thing his voice had called me out back then, or else I really might've lost my way and been ruined. But looking at his horrendous getup now, I was too lazy to explain these details.

Right now, my body was in complete turmoil and felt extremely uncomfortable. I took a deep breath and focused on suppressing my chaotic qi, casting him a glance. His face was white and miserable as he searched for something within his robes.

I caught his hand and said smoothly, "Forget it, you can stop looking. There's nothing good on you besides poisons, so don't even think of digging up some tonics. Call everyone to the main hall, I need to tell you guys something."

He seemed stunned.

"Go already..." I raised my volume, voice shaking slightly.

But he only looked at me worriedly, his expression exceptionally...

I trembled.

"If you're not going, then I'll do it myself." I suddenly leapt up, dusting off my robes before vigorously marching off without a hint of my injuries. He could only stomp after me hatefully. Truthfully, I was in really bad shape...it'd be better if there were less people to worry about me.

The main hall was very quiet.

After the disturbance I'd caused him before, the young Poison Prince looked to be full of indignation. Everyone else kept calm in the face of the unexpected. I forced a smile and sat down stiffly, pouring myself some tea. Even since Nongyu had broken his news to me, I'd been considering the matter. Though taking the first step was always difficult, this was something I had to say...

I raised my eyes to look at each and every one of their carefree, relaxed faces. Still, I couldn't figure out how to speak, but neither could I drag this on. I'm afraid if I didn't say it now, I'd forget.

Thinking back to the accident in the bamboo grove, I carefully lifted my cup and moved my hand, experimentally circulating the qi inside my body. I didn't anticipate that my whole body would turn listless as soon as I brushed against my qi reserves, making me weak. This body really couldn't compare to before. I leaned against my chair, the hand holding the cup shaking imperceptibly. Still, no traces showed on my face as I took a deep, steadying breath.

Refusing the pastry that Little Second handed my way, I rubbed my hands and surveyed the crowd, saying in a spiritless voice, "...why don't we all go our own ways."

"You gathered everyone just to tell us to leave? Are you making fun of us? I was in the middle of a chess game, just a few moves short of winning." The young Prince Mole rapped the table, but Little Sixth carefully tugged at him before he reconsidered and raised his voice. "Go

our own ways? Master, what do you mean?"

"... .." I had no words, sipping from the cup in my hands.

"Are you staring at some silver on the ground? Raise your head to speak," First said coldly.

I quivered, frightened as I blurted out, "My mortal enemy's coming this way, so everyone should just pack up and leave this place."

"Sheesh, was that it? Fine, that's easy. I'll go tidy things up and hire a carriage," Little Second found it too much as he nodded his head, preparing to leave the room. But First held him back, raising his head to speak softly.

"What do you mean by those words? Do you want us all to leave you behind?"

"What?!"

Multiple people stood up, their eyes sharp enough to bore holes in me. I held my cup and wanted to speak, but suddenly didn't know what to say...

Should I admit that I wanted to train last night and break through before Han Zichuan found me? That I vainly attempted recovering all my internal energy in one shot, but ended up in a far worse state? That after I woke up this morning, I almost forgot who Little Sixth was, even though he was lying right next to me?

Could I say those things? It'd only add to their worries.

In truth, the world's most formidable foes didn't come from the jianghu, but the royal court. No matter how much power or influence you had, no matter how great your skills, there was no way to escape from imperial clutches. Not to mention, the Han Zichuan I knew was the sovereign of this country. I refused to implicate my followers with me.

This accursed body of mine would be a burden sooner or later. Right now, I could barely muster the third tier's worth of internal energy reserves. I lowered my head and comforted myself by grasping the glossy cup. Unconsciously, my hand began to use qi against it.

The sudden action made my body feel wrong. Hot qi rushed into my head and turned it numb. Memories began to scatter like strands of silk before I quickly recovered my senses, afraid to use any more. My smile turned into self-ridicule as I settled back in my seat, paralyzed. In the future, it seemed that not only would I be a person who couldn't use her internal energy, but one whose memory loss would be inevitable. If they continued following me, they'd have no future prospects. Thus, I drew in another breath and tried to persuade them again.

"I'll stay by myself while the rest of you leave. This was a decision I came to after lots of thought and it's for your good. I'll just say this much, so think it over carefully."

A hand forcefully rested on my sleeve, and First spoke slowly by my side. "We said we'd serve you back then. Wherever you go, that's where we'll follow."

Shocked, I blinked a few times, unable to process his words. "The person searching for me is a very difficult opponent. You're all no match for him."

"Not important."

"I'd like to see just what kind of person has the Carefree Idler at her wit's end," the young Prince Mole shouted out cheerfully.

Gradually, my lips drew up in a smile as well.

They didn't realize, but there were plenty of people I couldn't stand up against in this world. Just in this very room, I could count one, three, four...six others.

[1] jade xiao (玉箫) —yuxiao, a vertical end-blown flute usually made from bamboo. [2] seal his internal passageways (点了他的位) —dianle tade wei, used in wuxia and xianxia novels by skilled practitioners to seal off various energy channels in the body, thus paralyzing their victims. With this, you can stop the flow of Qi, blood, magic, air, etc., as the story requires. [3] dantian (丹田) —area around the abdomen used by cultivators to refine their Qi and techniques. [4] sarcastic (冷嘲热讽) —lengchao refeng, literally "with freezing irony and burning satire," or with "biting sarcasm."

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xiao_\(flute\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xiao_(flute))

Chapter 40

Nighttime. A crescent moon hung high in the skies.

After soaking in the bath for a while, I climbed out of the wooden tub, my skin wrinkled from the water. I absent-mindedly tossed on some white robes and rolled onto my bed, tossing and turning with my cold, wet hair. My entire head felt numb, making it impossible to go to sleep.

The windows reflected shadows of willow branches swaying in the wind. Abruptly, I heard the melodious notes of a flute. It stirred me up with a quiver, and I climbed off the bed, loosely tying my robes about me to go outside.

"Master, you're not sleeping?" Little Second sat at the stone table in the courtyard on night watch. When he rose up to see me, the brush in his hands rolled off the table and clattered to the ground, and I bent down to pick it up. A glance showed me the layers and layers of white papers resting on the table, filled with pill formulas. A few stacks of books rested on the side, in between which were papers covered in bold ink strokes that resembled the shape of a human form...

He blocked my view, hands resting against the table with a secretive air as he gave a shamefaced blush. I laughed in spite of myself and said, "You should go rest early. The wind's so strong here, the lamp light can't help but flicker. Do you not want to keep your eyes?"

He hurriedly clutched the books to his chest, speaking in a low voice.

"As soon as I clean up here, I'll go inside."

He was red to the base of his ears. Who hadn't experienced this before? Look at him, flustered just from looking at acupuncture diagrams of females. Thinking back to the time my secret pornography book was passed off as an acupuncture diagram, I must have had the same helplessly red face. Just remembering it made the corners of my mouth turn up.

"You're not sleeping even though it's night, and now you've run out here without an extra layer of robes." Second's voice interrupted my thoughts as he looked at me. I figured he must have successfully hidden his goods, because his tone was bolder than before.

"I couldn't sleep. When I heard First playing the flute, I decided to take a look." I replied with a lazy stretch.

"Master, your hearing's getting worse as well," he followed the direction of my gaze to see the pavilion beyond, and laughed. "That's Fifth playing the flute. First is entertaining a guest inside the hall, how would he have free time for such things?"

"A guest?" What kind of guest dropped by in the middle of the night?

"I think it's probably one of those bored, curious types that came to see the Carefree Idler. With First dealing with them, Master doesn't have to worry," he placed a soft cushion on the stone bench and helped me sit down, gaze drifting hotly in the direction of the pavilion. "Is Fifth's music annoying? Shall I order him away?"

"It's been a while since I've heard it, so I want to listen." I said lightly. A weight suddenly lifted off my shoulders as my outer robes fell to the floor. Second gave me a gentle look as he draped it over my shoulders again.

"With the wind this strong, you shouldn't just sit still. Your body won't be able to bear it in the long run, so I could warm up some wine for you. Oh, that's right..." He scratched his head and smiled abashedly. "There's also some sweet soup in the kitchens. I originally made it on a whim, but purposefully added some calming herbs to the mix. Wait here Master, and I'll get you a bowl."

I smiled warmly at his retreating figure and made to stand up. I didn't want him to run about for my sake, but for him to rest early if there was nothing else to do. Before I could speak, however, he had already disappeared. Instead, the continuous notes of the flute floated up, low and borne with a certain grief. I seized up, and looked towards the pavilion again in time to see a figure playing the flute emerge from the shadows to be bathed in silver moonlight.

The water rippled beneath the pavilion to reflect his ugly face and a pair of startlingly bright, crystalline eyes. He seemed to have something weighing on his mind as he played at the moon, the music wistful and somewhat heartbreaking.

I was very familiar with this song.

~ ~ ~

I asked the world how many sorrows it held

A single evening brought autumn to the 8,000 year jade[1]

Why not wander instead to distant lands
Reckless and unbridled in the jianghu
Until this life ends?

The idler drinks a flask of wine alone
Leaving behind vast sorrows and joys
Far from youth lies the buried flowers[2].

~ ~ ~

This was a song that I had written myself after departing for the jianghu.

My courtesy name was Zang, my given name Hua, and I self-professed to be a carefree idler, but the jianghu was just a place for me to run away. I sat on the stone bench, holding a brush in my hands as bitterness rose in my heart. There was no choice but to smile...

A drop of ink splattered against the snow white paper, an eye-catching sight. I thought of Fourth's mole by his eye. It made him look so clever, with none of the desolate grief that accompanied him.

Fifth's face might have been ruined, but his eyes were as bright and clear as his, free from the wind and dust of the world.

Second's expressions resembled him most, though he only expressed a third of his gloominess and seventy percent of his sorrow. That person

was far more indifferent and desolate...

Yifu had always resembled an Immortal. There was no one who could approach his looks.

The qi in my chest churned wildly as if trying to express my emotions. I propped myself up with one hand as my sleeve swept across the table, and lowered my brush. It was as if everything had been seared into my memories. The things I'd thought I'd forgotten kept crashing over me like tidewaters, just like his looks...

All this time, deep in my memories, I'd never forgotten him.

—

I gave a final twist to the tip of the brush and set it aside. Fang Hua once told me that you could paint a person's soul in their portrait. He used to laugh that the blossoms, bugs, birds, and beasts I drew were very lifelike but all looked like him. He should know...even though I missed him terribly now, I could only bring out a third of his essence on paper.

If a person really had the three souls and seven desires...then the Fang Hua on the paper had three souls. As for his seven desires, they must be hidden deep within my heart, fused into my blood where nothing could tear them away...

I reached out my hand and lightly touched my drawing, right on that slightly furrowed forehead. My body bent over as I rested a cheek against the surface. Yifu, though it's difficult to forget you, I'll do my best...

Suddenly, the flute stopped playing, and Little Fifth shouted, "Who dares to charge into here!" I raised my head abruptly and saw a mass of lights outside our residence, countless flickers of flame surrounding us on all sides to set the mountains ablaze. There was the qi of a stranger in the courtyard, concealed in the dark. When he slowly revealed himself, it was with a smile.

"Shao'er, it's been awhile," he said.

—

I had to think for a second. Who was this?

Very few people knew me as Shao'er. Also, this person's voice was quite magnetic, neither quick nor slow but very nostalgic. It couldn't be...

Something dropped into the pit of my stomach as I heard the rustling of clothing in the dark. He had very heavy steps as he stepped into the moonlight, tall, straight, and handsome. That expression between his eyebrows was something I was intimately familiar with. He still wore the same smile and looked at me the same way, eyes filled with warmth.

But this wasn't the youth with thriving heroic spirit from all that time ago. After five years, he radiated the steady, mature aura of a refined scholar, gentle and fine.

"...Zichuan."

His lips quirked up into a smile as he gave me a look pregnant with meaning. "It's fortunate you still remember me."

This atmosphere was a bit strange. He spoke so lightly, but I already felt shaken and uncomfortable. I could see First standing by his side, looking at me with a face full of astonishment. Could it be that Zichuan was the guest he'd been receiving tonight?

Curses...

If I'd known Zichuan would come searching houses in the middle of the night, I'd have moved everyone this morning. People in the imperial court were too efficient with their jobs. Nongyu just told me the emperor was making inspection visits incognito, and now he was on my doorstep. Were there seriously so many people in the palace who had nothing better to do than follow the emperor around on manhunts?

"What are you silently disapproving about?" he smiled like the sun, though it didn't reach his eyes. His line of vision drifted to my hands. "I've been worrying over you every day in the imperial court, yet you have enough leisure time to paint here beneath the moon." The last line came from his lips between gritted teeth.

I clutched my picture tighter, neither willing nor unwilling to let it go. My face felt both hot and cold as I gave an angry laugh and moved the inkstone to hold the paper in place. "You needn't worry about my personal affairs."

A hand suddenly grabbed me by the arm, nearly setting me off-balance as he held me in his grip, looking at my drawing expressionlessly. When

his gaze drifted to me again, his eyes narrowed with the promise of a threat. Narrowing eyes...who didn't know how to do that?

I narrowed my eyes back.

"Scoundrel! Let go of our Master!" Little Fifth's voice called out from the pavilion, flustered and discomfited.

Han Zichuan gave him a once-over. "This is another one of your Princes?" I felt a tightness around my waist as he closed his other arm around me to give Fifth a disdainful glance.

"I'm going to pound you!" Fifth was definitely enraged.

I blinked. He'd yelled his intentions before I could react. Though it didn't scare any of the surrounding people, it shocked me, and stirred the man by my side into action. His grip on my arm slowly tightened as if punishing me, nearly forcing the air from my lungs. A face leaned over as he spoke in a low voice, his breath hot against my ears. "You still haven't wholly forgotten him, Shao'er.."

There was a wildly thumping heartbeat. It belonged to him.

I could even feel it between the layers of our robes, though I couldn't tell whether he felt uneasy, wrathful, or something else altogether... My thoughts slipped, and a strong gale blew over, whipping about my hair. An indistinct object flew quickly towards us, aiming at the person gripping me. Yet Zichuan kept his hold with no intention of letting me go.

Suddenly, sword-wielding figures emerged from the shadows to block the blow. There was a flash of light, before a flute was knocked deep into the depths of a willow tree. Little Fifth narrowed his eyes at the men, his scar making him seem even more ferocious.

“Why did you raise such an ugly man?” Zichuan lowered his face to speak by my ear, still smiling. The words were loud enough to ring in the courtyard, and his hands took the opportunity to slip down to my waist, wrapping around the sash there. It was enough to tell me he was angry.

But...angry?

What was he mad about? Angry that I raised someone ugly? Or that I was raising men in the first place?

Little Fifth gave me a glance and grew even more enraged. Yet instead of cursing, he unsheathed his sword and slashed his way over. The shadowy swordsmen quickly surrounded him.

Fifth's martial arts skills and accomplishments ranked amongst the top ten in the jianghu. If you didn't count the few top masters who didn't like to leave seclusion, or had disappeared over the years, then Fifth would rank amongst the top three. But today he seemed a little fatigued. He raised his arm to block the enemies' swords but kept glancing my way, his face filled with anxiety. On the side, First stared as Han Zichuan embraced me, neither helping Fifth nor speaking a word. He seemed to be considering something, but I was afraid to check his expression.

The fierce fighting continued...

There were many top-level experts within the imperial court, especially those qualified to accompany the emperor's retinue. Fifth wasn't their match, and I began to grow anxious while looking at him.

"If your Master wanted me to let go, she would have pushed me away earlier. Can't you understand something like this?" The voice by my ear spoke with absolution, gloating over his misfortune.

Your Granny! If you had any skills, why not try to kill him with your own hands?

Little Fifth's mental state was already unsteady, and his moves were wild and erratic. On the verge of being stabbed, he avoided with a flip to the side, readying his sword for another round.

"Hold it..." I spoke up, and he looked at me in surprise. He was already huffing for breath, and his eyes gleamed in the dark.

"Who told you to randomly attack our guests? No sense of propriety, hurry up and leave."

"Yes, Master." his face was sullen.

Brat, this is for your own good...

He made an obeisance towards me and kept his head lowered as he sheathed his sword, turning to leave with a dejected air...only to silently walk back and scale the willow tree in search of his flute. His body was shaking, yet filled with determination until he recovered the damaged

instrument and departed. There was only the lonely image of his back as he walked, carefully replacing the flute in his robes.

This flute...

It was something I gave him on a whim after picking him up from the streets.

A sudden sadness fell upon my heart.

—

Little Fifth seemed furious, venting his anger by hitting the willow branches as he stalked off the whole way. First rested a hand on his shoulders, as if trying to comfort him. The moonlight illuminated his form and cast the illusion that he was wearing robes of snow.

"From the back, he really does look like Fang Hua," There was a disappointed sigh by my side. Han Zichuan gave me a look as he indicated First. I gave a start, hesitantly resting my hands over his on my waist before twisting them off me.

"Shao'er, how cruel," he smiled wryly as he massaged his hands. Then he bent to retrieve the windswept drawing I'd left on the table. The moment he rested his eyes on it, I grew anxious and tried to snatch it back. He backed away and stared at me before ripping it in half. "Isn't it just a drawing?" Two pieces of paper fluttered to the ground, the identity of its subject unmistakable with the mole at the corner of his eye.

Should I complain, or should I grieve? My heart grew inflamed, but I held it back, speaking in a light tone. "You bastard Han, what do you think you're doing?"

"Insolent, you dare to be impertinent before the emp..." Before the random lackey could finish speaking, I killed him with a well-aimed stone.

What a joke. As the Carefree Idler, there were only things I didn't deal with, not things I couldn't. Though my strange cultivation had eaten up over half my internal energy, I was adept at putting on airs and bluffing. For a servant, there was a time and place to speak. Things you shouldn't say should be kept behind your mouth.

I gave the corpse a cold look. Perhaps it was because I'd used my internal energy, but the true qi inside me was in chaos and made my chest feel stuffy. Still, I assumed an expression of indifference. The wind flew past my robes in a riotous dance, drying out most of my hair as it blew messily past my face. A few of the black-robed swordsmen carried fear on their faces as they prepared to attack. But Han Zichuan waved a hand to hold them. Then he gestured again, and everyone retreated from the courtyard, leaving only the two of us.

"Your temper resembles your yifu more and more," he slowly sat down, eyes sweeping over me. "I've been searching for you for a long time. I never expected you to hurt my heart as soon as we met."

A cup of wine poured onto the ground, splattering the drawing there and watering down the ink. My heart twisted in pain as I looked at him. His face was stiff, stuck between a half-smile as he rinsed another cup with wine and poured it on the paper. Was this a hint?

Was he reminding me that Fang Hua was in his hands and at his mercy?

Or that Fang Hua belonged to him, and he wouldn't tolerate me thinking of him?

After a few years apart, he was nothing like the wide-eyed Han Zichuan I knew. The boy that obediently did my bidding in my house, that gave the utmost consideration to everyone, was now the sovereign of a country. An emperor that had resorted to political trickery to control the lives of the masses now sat by himself in this courtyard in plain robes, bearing still refined, eyes still clear. And yet none of that could hide the commanding, dignified air that emanated naturally from his true self. Extremely unhappy, I poured myself a cup of wine and prepared to drink.

He actually pushed my hand away and spoke coldly. "You're letting your fancies run wild with that painting, but you don't have the guts to see him yourself. Why not come back with me to the palace?" I was dumbfounded while he raised the wine to sniff its contents.

He should already know how Fang Hua felt about him...

I gave a pained smile, my heart aching a bit. "Instead of being a proper emperor, you ran around the outside world just to tell me this?"

"I've been looking for you constantly for the past five years."

You've been looking for me constantly, but what about him?

"Why did you hide from me for so long? I only just found out today..." he trailed off, pouring out a shallow cup of wine to hold the cup in his hands, "That the celebrated Carefree Idler of the jianghu was exactly the Shao'er I was looking for."

"...is he doing well?"

"Who?" he pretended to ponder my words, before turning to smile at me. But that smile seemed to make my hair stand on end. "Let's not talk about others, I want to talk about you." He leaned over and added, "You're living very well now, right? I heard you took in Seven Princes, each of them highly skilled and beautiful."

"What, you want them?"

He gnashed his teeth. "Say that again."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "My name as the Carefree Idler in the jianghu isn't just for show. Don't think I'm a pushover or easy to bully. I may dote on and yield to the young Princes in this house because I can't bear to hurt them, but you're not the same case."

"You mean to say that Zhen[3] can't even compare to the likes of them."

Oi...he even started using Zhen, the imperial pronoun. Looks like I really pushed him to be angry. I laughed, yet his gaze turned unexpectedly soft.

"I don't blame you. You can be intelligent sometimes, but you're always so dense about your own matters. No matter how well-known you are in

the jianghu, all lands under Heaven belong to Zhen, and that jianghu is no exception. So..." he embraced me from behind, "Don't go against me, all right?"

He carried himself humbly, and his voice was soft, even carrying a note of pleading. But none of that matched his actions. Getting this domineering with a person was shameful and detestable! On reflex, I started to circulate internal energy in my palm to strike him down. Yet Fang Hua's face appeared in my mind, and I forced down my attack impulse.

For him, I'd...

For him, I couldn't hurt this person. I tried to avoid him instead, but Han Zichuan was more impertinent than I thought. He kept his tight hold on me while reaching for his cup of wine. The moonlight was like white silk, and an unfamiliar gentleness rose from his face. One hand held mine in place while the other raised the wine cup to my lips. The wine was rich and mellow, and his heart pounded within the depths of his warm embrace.

"I won't blame you for avoiding me," he tightened his grip on my waist and pressed closer, speaking next to my ear. "Come back with me to the palace and I won't bring this up again."

"In your dreams."

"In my dreams?" he laughed lightly. "You can only wish it was in my dreams. Even if you won't consider your own self-interests...you should think a bit about theirs."

He had a point. I didn't know when, but there were now six familiar figures standing in the courtyard, looking at us both. The black-robed swordsmen stood with torches at our gates, and many more lights illuminated the mountains. It seemed that quite a few people had arrived. Still, the expressions the Princes wore were as easy as ever. Each one of them were as tall and thin as jade trees, with handsome faces.

Yet looking at them, I only wanted to hide away, my heart stirred into a flurry. Sure enough, Han Zichuan glanced at them and laughed in understanding. "Shao'er, are these your Princes? As expected, they all resemble... Well, I really don't know what kind of impression they'd make on a person who saw them."

I could only sense multiple gazes coming to rest on me, each one boring holes into my body.

"Think it over..." he paused, looking around the house. "I'll wait for your answer." My hands felt tied behind my back as he walked towards the rooms.

Hmph, this guy was really acting like he owned the place.

[1] 8,000 years jade (八千玉老) —baqian yulao, this phrase seems similar to the lyrics of a song called the Cha Na Fang Hua Qu (刹那芳华曲) [<http://baike.baidu.com/view/1325979.htm>], or The Ephemeral Beauty Song, which in turn comes from Volume 1 Chapter 1 of a 2001 xuanhuan novel/2011 TV series called In Search of the Supernatural《搜神记》 [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwnQCNGsNdc>], which in turn was

probably inspired by an actual text of the same name

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_Search_of_the_Supernatural] that dates from 4th century CE China

[<https://eastasiastudent.net/china/classical/sou-shen-ji-395/>]. To put it (very) simply, the “8,000 years jade” in this case is an euphemism for a long life.

The song that Shao'er wrote has a similar mood, theme, and lyrics to The Ephemeral Beauty Song, which you can listen to on youtube here [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOI4L73Hf0g>]. It's currently one of the most well-known modern xuanhua inspired songs (and very pretty!).

[2] far from youth lies the buried flowers (芳华尽处乃葬花) —fanghua jingchu nai zanghua, there seems to be intentional word play here. “Fang Hua” (芳华), or “youth”, is identical to Fang Hua, while “Zang Hua” (葬花), “buried flowers”, sounds like Shao'er's assumed named for her Carefree Idler disguise, “Zang Hua” (葬华). All this means that another way to read this line would be ‘far from Fang Hua lies Zang Hua (Shao'er).’ Please note I took some creative liberties with “lies”. [3] Zhen (朕) —“I, the sovereign, the royal We;” personal pronoun used exclusively by the emperor to refer to himself.

Chapter 41

I felt on the verge of falling apart.

None of the other rooms were to Han Zichuan's satisfaction, so now he was using mine. I lingered for awhile in the courtyard before shrugging my shoulders, ignoring the resentful stares behind my back from his men as I headed to the main hall.

The door closed, and the air in the room turned icy.

All the residents of the household were already awaiting me inside as I gave them an embarrassed smile. Little Sixth suddenly rose to his feet, blowing away the heat from cup of tea before handing it to me. He even earnestly raised his sleeve to wipe away the cold sweat that had broken out across my forehead. Yet the more he rubbed, the more my throat felt blocked up.

This is what was called a guilty conscience.

First was in a chair at the head, holding the lid of his teacup as he sat deep in thought, in no rush to try his drink. Fifth sat the furthest away on the side, slumping in his chair as he hugged the broken flute. His eyes seemed filled with icy resentment before they swept my way.

"Master, are you cold?"

"No, not cold."

"Then is it too hot? Look at how much you're sweating..." the Poison Prince sprawled casually over a chair, waving his garish purple sleeves. "Let's fan our Master more, it'd be best if the wind whipped her to death."

Did I provoke you or something? Offend you somehow?

Fourth was busy with something on the side, brushing the mole by his eye with a secret smile as he narrowed his eyes to glance over. He picked up a piece of paper that had been held together with plaster and handed it to First. That paper...it was so familiar. Wasn't it the same one that Han Zichuan tore in half?

The game was up.

First put aside his tea and swept his gaze over the painting in his hands. Second couldn't keep still, but stuck his hands in his sleeves as he stood behind him, speaking softly. "The mole looks like Little Fourth's, the eyes like Little Fifth's. The figure and bearing are even more enchanting than you, the eldest, while the expression is a bit like Little Third's. Who exactly is in this picture?"

This painting had been splashed with wine into a spotty mess, but they could still distinguish these similarities...how impressive. I kept my head lowered and continued to pretend I was deaf. First slowly lowered the paper to the table. His movements were gentle, but the entire table had started to shudder...

"Who was it that came tonight?" his voice was cool and crystal clear.

I grew a little braver as I rose to meet his eyes. "Uh...you're the one who received the guest, you don't know who he is?"

"Don't get smart with me. He was looking for you, not me, and I couldn't ask him much under the circumstances."

Oh...so you're asking me instead.

As soon as he glared, I grew weak and bowed my head, adjusting a corner of my robes in an unnatural fashion. My answer came out like a mosquito speaking. "A personal enemy."

"How big of a grudge do you have with him? As soon as the two of you met, there was holding and hugging." I felt a chill as his hand slammed the table, freeing a layer of dust. A small section of the wood chipped and fell off. "You never told me your personal enemy was the current reigning emperor." He was so angry, his whole body was trembling.

"Well, you never asked. Not to mention, this isn't something all that great," I shrugged my shoulders, picking up the fallen piece of wood and blowing on it a few times before pressing it back onto the table. From a distance it almost looked...as whole as it was before. "You should know life will be harder now under the emperor's eye. Economize where you can, and don't break things as you please when you're in a temper."

He glared at me again.

I smiled. "Of course, if you want to go back on your promise now and scatter, you can still divide up the goods in this house. None of you will be shortchanged."

The young Fourth Prince actually snorted, his mole attractive as ever. "The things in this house were all bought by First or myself. How could we let you take charge of handing them out?"

"Like hell we'll split the goods," the Poison Prince was unusually composed. He had held himself back before bursting out now. "An esteemed guy like me isn't lacking for anything."

"We've all been saying, we'll go wherever you go." Second stood before me, deftly clutching my sleeve to grasp my hand beneath the cloth. My heart softened.

First stood up, waving his sleeves as he issued some orders. "Little Second, Little Third. Guard the front and back doors and don't let a certain person escape tonight." He held his hands behind his back and leisurely strolled off, not even sparing me a glance.

"And also..." I spoke up again, even though my next words would ruin the atmosphere. There was no other way around it, though, I couldn't figure it out myself. My voice lowered as I muttered, "Where do I sleep tonight?"

"Any one of you that dares to shelter and serve Master tonight will be

dealt with family law[1],” First spoke in spite of his gloominess, before stepping out the door. Under the flickering lamplight, I watched him leave in a daze. By one side, Little Sixth tugged on my clothes until I regained my senses and smiled. Though he couldn’t speak, I could tell he was alarmed and very uneasy.

I reached out to caress his hair. “I’m not going anywhere. It’s all right... don’t worry about me.”

Since the emperor had caught me, there was nowhere to run. Five years of living in the jianghu had been rather lonely. Whenever I saw someone who resembled him, I would have an urge to bring him with me. Year after year, this went on until I took in more and more people. Han Zichuan wasn’t wrong. From the very beginning, I had no way to forget that person...

Being able to raise the young Princes by my side meant I could look at them everyday, and pretend I was back in my happy life at the house. Beautiful days would pass by my eyes as if Fang Hua was still by my side, looking after me, living a peaceful and comfortable life.

In this way, I convinced myself that I was living well, even if I was alone.

—

Too many things had happened tonight for me to go back to bed. Besides...there was no place for me to sleep. Every single one of them had cut me off, not even leaving me with spare covers as they walked off, yawning. The last one even shut the doors of the main hall behind me.

I sat on the stone steps to the hall for a long time, but couldn't decide where to go. Technically, we had guest rooms in the residence, but they were only guest rooms in name. Nobody had disturbed me for years, so those few worn-out rooms had never been tidied up. The floorboards were all rotten, and we didn't even have bedsheets. I couldn't exactly go to sleep hugging a bundle of dry grass for warmth, that felt a bit too pathetic.

I rested a chin in my hands and knitted my eyebrows, thinking over First's parting words. What did he say? Something about... 'any one of you that dares to shelter and serve Master tonight will be dealt with family law'?

Hey!

I slapped my thigh. 'Any one of you' didn't include himself. Like I said, his words were sharp as knives but he had a heart like tofu, so he definitely couldn't bear to see me freeze. Visibly pleased, I groped past the doors in the darkness until I saw the only point of light coming from his chambers. Looks like he really wanted me to keep him company...why not tell me earlier?

I quietly pushed open the door. By the pale yellow lamplight, a person sat at his table, robes draped over his shoulders. He seemed to be studying something. That figure and the slope of his shoulders...I stood by the threshold, a little stunned.

He didn't look back, but only said softly, "You were finally willing to come back..."

Hearing his voice, and the desolation in his tone, my mind seemed to burst inside, the events of the past and present mixing together. My eyes grew hot, and I rubbed them with my sleeves, walking over to embrace him. Tears poured from my eyes as I buried my face between his shoulders.

"Master?" First trembled as if frightened. It was his first time speaking so respectfully, as if he was at a loss.

Yifu...

"Call me Shao'er."

He fell silent and stiffened, a bronze mirror reflecting a tender, indescribably sorrowful expression on his face. The loneliness emanating from his being was so much of the same, sinking into my bones and marrow. Yifu, I miss you very much. Why can't I forget you even after all these years?

His voice was steady as he spoke, word for word: "Shao'er."

My heart shook, and my arms held him with considerable strength. His warmth was unfamiliar and he lacked that nostalgic scent, but his figure and voice were identical. First turned around, but I awkwardly lowered my head and just held him tighter.

"Don't move... Just let me hold you for awhile, even if it's just a moment longer."

First, I'm sorry.

This really was the last time. I had tried so hard to forget that person, but how could you forget a memory seeped into your very marrow? Perhaps something had injured my state of mind, because qi suddenly started churning wildly within my chest, causing me pain. I only kept holding on, forcing myself to ignore the chaos inside my body as I embraced his warmth.

"Shao'er," he couldn't discern my struggles, but only spoke softly. "What exactly is the relationship between you and that personal enemy of yours?"

"Are you jealous?"

He didn't reply.

Very good, you knew how to be jealous. My good yifu would never be jealous on account of me.

He would only say, 'Shao'er, let Zichuan have his way for a while.'

He would only say, 'It's Zichuan and I that are going, not you...we can't bring you to the palace.'

In a flash, I held onto his shoulders, softly rubbing my cheek against his robes. "Tell me, yifu, should I enter the palace this time?"

He tugged my hand, brows knitted as he asked me, "Who exactly are you taking me for?" The papers on the table rustled, my painting among them an enchanting sight beneath the candlelight. "He, was he the reason you took us all in?"

My eyes widened, then curved into a smile. "If I say yes, would you accept it?"

He carefully studied me before listlessly releasing my hand, laughing in spite of himself. There was a sense of giving up in his tone, and a bit of loneliness. "Master, things that need to be resolved should still be resolved. Even if you stop thinking about it, some things can't be forgotten as old dreams..."

"If he's in the palace, then you should go."

—

Early morning, when the skies were still dim.

A covered carriage was waiting by the front gates. Before it stood a middle aged man who looked to be a high-leveled expert that bowed politely as he spoke. "Fellow Princes, your servant is here on his master's orders to receive the lady."

The atmosphere around the breakfast table was oppressive. The Poison Prince, who had been silently eating his food, slapped his chopsticks on the table and grumbled, "Even if you guys don't eat, our Master should. What's the rush? Careful I don't feed you poison."

I took a bite of my meal.

"Little Third, don't frighten him. Sixth, give Master more porridge."

Ah...

More food?

I timidly glanced at Little Fourth, who had given out the order. Ever since he had sat at the table, he'd only moved his mouth and not his bowl. At most he'd wave his chopsticks around with his head bowed, as if trying to do a divination. I quietly decided to keep eating.

"Master, eat more. I added special ingredients to this porridge and these side dishes," Little Second added from the side. I did a spit-take, and he quickly rose to wipe the mess with his sleeves.

"Little Second, ah...you've been clean and honest for so long. Why did you copy Little Third at the crucial moment and add poison?"

He rolled his eyes, sitting next to me and squeezing out Little Sixth. Holding up the bowl, he fed me a big spoonful of porridge. "I did learn all my poison knowledge from you. But after you enter the palace, I won't have a chance to take care of you anymore, so I added lots of antidotes to this porridge. It'll give you immunity against temptation drugs, mosquito bites..."

I began to tremble. "These are all antidotes. It's not like I'm poisoned, and they'll lose effect after half a day anyways. You..."

"It's still fine if it's effective for half a day, Master...there are people as ferocious as wolves and tigers in the imperial court who have designs against all and any emperors. Come...have another spoonful."

From the side, someone coughed. That high-leveled expert couldn't take it anymore, and his face was starting to twitch...

"It's getting late. Stop feeding her and just let her go." First stood up with a long face, and fished out a package from his robes, tossing it into my lap. "These are all essential items we've prepared like clothing and daily articles. Don't play around for too long and remember to come home once in a while."

Come home...

There was a certain charm to those two words that made me treasure them...especially since his voice sounded so much like Fang Hua's. I gave a start as someone next pressed on my sleeves and looked up to see Little Fourth's face.

"I've divined an inauspicious omen but I think you can handle it, so I won't dissuade you." Even as he spoke, the mole at the corner of his eye trembled, making him especially cute. "These are a few of the charms I draw on a daily basis, they might come in handy in an emergency."

I took a glance and saw a thick stack of papers. Did he really draw this

many on a daily basis? Why did some of the ink look half-wet, as if he'd drawn them recently?

"Then, I'm going." Yet I couldn't move. Someone was clutching at my robes.

Fifth, who had been silent all this time, held onto me with his head bowed, the broken flute still dangling by his waist. It seemed like he was about to cry. I lightly drew him into my arms and patted him, as if I was comforting a child.

"When I return, I'll definitely heal your face."

"It's fine if you don't, you...just have to come back." The voice was extremely stiff.

I grinned.

"Only these blasted servants would be so ill-behaved. It's easy to get hungry and nauseous on a bumpy, tilting carriage like that, so I've prepared some pastries and porridge. I've put them in this bamboo steamer so Master can eat them on the road." Still the worrywart, Little Second had packed away the antidote-laced breakfast. I raised my arm and personally accepted the package.

With a bow, I left my life in this house behind, and stepped towards the carriage. After just one step, someone grabbed my collar and hauled me inside, nearly making me fall on my face. What the heck...

Who else was in here?

I carefully guarded my basket of food that had nearly spilled over as I staggered to my feet. Someone actually grabbed the back of my collar, and a grip tightened around my waist before I was pulled back to sit on something warm. I shifted around a bit...

Actually, it felt pretty comfortable.

There was a light laugh, and a voice spoke intimately by my ear. "Don't move around...I'm hungry, you know."

I clutched the person's robes as I twisted my neck to see a face wearing a wholly respectable expression. In the dim morning light, his pupils glittered like stars, and that mouth was curved in a smile full of profound meaning. Stunned, I blurted out the first thing that came to my mind. "You didn't sleep in my room last night? What did you go do?"

Han Zichuan laughed, leaning against my ear as he hugged me, a hand reaching into my bamboo steamer basket to feel around. "What kind of food do you have here..."

There was plenty to eat. "Sweet jujube cakes, scallion rolls, mantou with candied dates, millet porridge..."

Wait, why was I telling him all this?

Without a hint of manners, he picked up a piece of meat wrapped in sticky rice and started chewing, every movement as graceful as an

aristocrat. When he was finished, he even had the gall to add, "It doesn't taste any worse than the palace food, though the flavor is a bit strange."

Of course it was, there were things added in. You'd compare this with the palace in the same breath?

A whiff of this scent was enough to tell me it was a drug designed to eliminate and reduce the desires. I shifted in my seat again. "Move over, you're crowding me." Glancing at him, I carefully got off to sit by his side. Though his eyebrows furrowed, he didn't say a word. Little Second had really thought things through. This drug was very clever.

"It's a long trip from the palace here. You're just running off and ignoring things back at court?"

"There's not much happening at court. Taking you back is more important."

Well, thank you. He actually considered me important. Now that I thought of it, something didn't feel right.

"You're in such a rush to bring me back to the palace this time. Don't tell me something's wrong with that person?"

"That person?" Han Zichuan's lips curved into a disdainful smile. "You're still worrying over him." The air around us abruptly turned cold. He suddenly leaned over to speak in my ear, raising his voice.

"What is this?"

There was an open bundle before me, filled with a thick stack of glistening yellow charm papers and two or three pitch-black pills. Fourth had prepared the charms, but as for the pills...

Han Zichuan frowned. Reluctant to touch them with his hands, he wrapped the pills in a silk cloth and hid it in his robes. He cast me a suspicious glance as he spoke in a calm voice. "Zhen will hold these for you."

He probably thought it was some type of nefarious poison. Truthfully speaking, I'd forgotten most of the formulas for my most terrifying ones. Besides, who would put poison into such large, unwieldy pills? It'd be too hard to dissolve them in water, and it wasn't like you could feed your victims directly without them resisting. I smiled wryly and leaned against the window, my face turned away as I huddled up against the cushions.

...who knew what Little Fourth saw in his divinations? He probably snuck in the pills here because he worried too much. It'd be best if I never had to use them.

—

Leaves and branches flitted past the carriage window, a little distracting. The interior of the carriage wasn't very spacious, and I could hear someone paging through sheets of paper. Turning, I saw that Han Zichuan had let down the bamboo blinds to block out the light. Shadows fell across his upper robes, which were embroidered with layers of clouds and falling flowers. He was sitting cross-legged with his chest wide open, the contours and shape of his body an alluring sight. One hand propped

up his head while the other flipped lazily through the stack of yellow charms. I lost interest and gave a yawn, and he smiled at me.

"Looking at you now, I can't tell how you made such a mysterious name for yourself in the jianghu for the past five years."

There's plenty of things you can't tell with a look...such as being blind to how much Fang Hua likes you while always thinking of me instead. I'm letting you do as you want, not because I fear you, but because of Fang Hua.

As the carriage rattled across the roads, Han Zichuan held onto the side of the carriage for balance and raised his eyebrows. His tone was remarkably sovereign-like as he spoke in annoyance. "Little Lin, slow down. Don't fool around and jolt this carriage so much."

"Sire, please hold onto your seat. "I'm afraid there's an unexpected surprise up front."

Han Zichuan gave a sound of ridicule and reached forward to open the curtains. "Looks like it's another ambush. Just focus on charging through and defending this carriage, you don't need to pay them any mind."

Astonished, I looked as he lowered the bamboo blinds, the movement quick and graceful. There was a glimpse of the driver's back, dressed in ordinary, coarse clothing as he sat at the reins to whip the horse. The guards that had been riding ahead of the carriage had all vanished, but there were sounds of combat coming from the woods.

Strange...

Who had the gall to ambush the emperor's carriage? Did they want to die? Han Zichuan smiled at me, sitting calmly by my side. He stroked my hand and gave it a pat. "Don't worry, I'm here."

Before he'd even finished speaking, there was a tearing noise. I squinted and grabbed Han Zichuan's sleeve, pressing him against the seat. Something ripped, and an object burst through the bamboo blinds. Cold air rushed inside in the wake of an arrow that lodged itself into the woodwork.

So close...

A second later, and the arrow would've pierced through Han Zichuan's back.

"Sire, are you all right?" the driver anxiously turned his head.

"Uninjured. We have to shake them off," Han Zichuan's face was ghastly pale as the carriage rattled even more severely. I prepared to go out but was dragged back to the seat and into his lap. Sounds of fighting rang out around us as I looked at his expression, still handsome and resolute. The eyebrows were imposing, and a fierce strand of killing intent shone in his eyes.

He...

Was he trying to protect me? I turned my face away, suddenly finding

the situation rather funny.

"Who dares to rob this carriage?" Our ride gave an obvious jolt as his heavy voice spoke. Amidst the sounds of fighting, the carriage shook heavily as it raced forward. Blood suddenly splashed against the bamboo blinds, staining a large section red.

"Die!"

A man covered in wounds barged inside, body leaning against the walls. In his hands he held a sword, thrusting at us with a desperate air. Han Zichuan reacted swiftly and avoided the blow, catching the attacker's sword arm as he blocked me from sight. His gaze was icy as he grit his teeth, as if having trouble holding him in place.

I took the chance to strike the attacker with my palm, causing him to stagger. He gave me a venomous glance and wiped his mouth with his sleeve, seemingly unhurt. Shocked, I looked at my hand. I'd used all of my force in that last attack. If this was the past, the force of the blow would've stunned him even if I missed. But now...not only was he unharmed, but the backlash had hit my internal energy, sending my body into chaos...

Couldn't I even use the third tier of internal energy now?

"Shao'er, watch out!"

Han Zichuan's shout brought me to my senses, just in time to see a sword headed my way. Curses, if I realized I'd lost my skills earlier, I

wouldn't have bothered showing off and getting involved. This guy could've stabbed whoever he wanted. I dodged left, then right, my agile movements constrained within the cramped space. A moment of inattention had me bumping against the edge of the seat, sending a wave of pain through my body. Ow. My hand groped around until it found a certain bundle.

In a moment of desperation, I pinched the bundle of charms between my fingers and waved it before my face. I didn't even bother to look at it before chanting a fire incantation. The attacker raised his sword...

And I smiled calmly as I raised my sleeves, revealing the blazing charms. All of them shot towards his forehead as blazing streams of fire, the force strong enough to blast his body out of the carriage. The remnants of the flames formed a gigantic fire dragon that soared into the skies.

Lowering my head, I dusted off my robes. It looked like I had used too many charms. I held onto the carriage walls for support as I helped up a dumbfounded Han Zichuan, assisting him to his seat. Copying his pose from earlier, I patted his shoulders and said in a low voice, "Don't worry, I'm here."

He looked at me in surprise, and I smiled.

Zichuan...

Did you really think I passed my days ignorantly these past few years? With so many Princes, of course I'd picked up a few of their tricks. After learning from Little Fourth, I didn't need to collect firewood anymore. A

single charm gave me enough fire to roast my sweet potatoes. It was also much more convenient. This time...since I used them all at once, there was no doubt the assassin was dead.

The wind blew in from the broken blinds as we rushed along, leaving the sounds of fighting far behind us in the woods. I sat thinking with my brows knitted. My technique had been effective, but it'd startled the horse...

Han Zichuan sat calmly on the seat, silent for a while before he looked over and spoke flatly, "Have you realized? Our driver Little Lin already died from falling off the horse."

[1] family law (家法) —jiafa, rules and punishments dealt out to family members by the head of a household, using involved corporal punishment like caning or flogging. Also a popular method for first wives and mother-in-laws to use against their new husband's wife/daughter-in-law.

Chapter 42

My brows furrowed, and I hastily opened the curtains to look outside, hands gripping the edge of the window. Fresh air mixed with hot, dense wind to assail my senses. My chest seethed, and a sense of disgust welled up within me. There was no one outside, and the quilt across the horse's back was splattered with tiny spots of blood.

The carriage was shaking violently now, and all I could hear was the sound of wheels crushing past stones mixed amidst thunderous hoofbeats. The scenery flew past us, branches occasionally scrabbling nosily against our vehicle. Startled by the fire dragon, the horse had his head bowed as he ran for his life. It was clear to see that the shock had frightened him out of his senses.

Straight in front of us was the edge of a cliff...

I gritted my teeth and reached for the reins whipping wildly in the wind. Just as my fingers were about to touch them...the carriage gave a heavy lurch and tilted to the left. Something seemed to be breaking apart. My eyes widened.

Curses! Someone had even sabotaged our ride...

"Shao'er, I think something's wrong with this carriage," someone spoke from within.

"That's right, it's about to fall to pieces."

Without anyone to control him, the horse ran past a bend in the road and kept rushing forward, dragging the shuddering carriage behind him straight over the cliff's edge...

I immediately turned towards the seated Han Zichuan and grabbed him by the arms. We burst through the carriage roof as I flew into the air, the wind whipping our robes.

"Where are we going?" Han Zichuan asked as I held him by the armpits, wind blowing his hair askew while he squinted at me. I ignored him, stepping lightly on air. He seemed as if he wanted to ask me more questions, but kept silent and held me tight instead.

This guy, he's so heavy...

Actually, I'd already regretted the moment I flew out of the carriage with him, so much that my intestines might've turned black and green. I didn't have much internal energy left, and here I was showing off. We hadn't even reached the top of the cliff before I ran out of qi. My foot slipped a few paces as my heart sank. One hand hastily reached out and grabbed an outcropping rock on the cliff face while the other carried the weight of a second person...a glance downwards revealed the carriage at the bottom of the cliff, utterly destroyed.

Our combined weights made it feel like my fingers were breaking.

"Shao'er..." he looked at me with a gentle smile. "Why aren't you letting me go?"

I choked on my silence as I held onto the rock in a death grip. Of course I wanted to let go, but for Fang Hua's sake, I couldn't just abandon you. The bottom of the cliff was a long ways down, but Han Zichuan kept smiling, though that smile...

...made me extremely uneasy. It was as if he'd come to some sort of decision.

My heart felt heavy as I tightened my grip on him, speaking in a tight voice. "Don't even think about moving around. I don't have enough strength to fish you back up if you drop."

He slowly smiled and reached out a hand to embrace me, those eyes shining like the light of shattered stars. Curses, I thought he was going to kill himself for my sake, but—hey, what's he doing with his hands like that...I...I really don't have any strength left!

My hand had stopped feeling sore and long turned numb, and blood was flowing down my wrist. The rock had cut into my flesh, but there was no pain as I raised my head, eyes searching. From here, I could see the light spilling over the edge of the cliff. Gritting my teeth, I summoned up all my reserves of internal energy and used brute strength to force my way up. My foot stepped on air as I leapt upwards, but before I could reach the top, qi burst into my chest and made me ill. It felt like my entire body was exploding from the inside. My vision blurred as everything grew hazy...

In the end, I blacked out.

The last thing I remembered was Han Zichuan gathering me into his arms as the scenery rushed past us. So even I had met with a day where I fell off a cliff. Little Fourth was right, this journey had really lead to a hugely inauspicious event.

I didn't know how much time had passed before a loud, shrill noise pierced through my muddled thoughts. My eyes opened weakly, but the sight I saw scared me to death. An abyss yawned before me and I instinctively backed away. Behind me was a dark cave, and around us were nothing but precipitous cliffs. Han Zichuan held me in a tight embrace.

One of his hands rested against my ear, the other holding an object that was expelling white smoke as it send a bright flare up into the pitch-black skies, illuminating it in a flash. It looked like some sort of signal. Since he had something like this, why not use it earlier, before we fell off the cliff...

Hold on, I'm not dead?

"Shao'er, I'm sorry...I woke you." he used a hand to feel my forehead as he muttered to himself. "Your fever still hasn't left you."

I wearily clutched his sleeves, my teeth gritted as I asked, "What exactly happened?"

"You fainted, probably from exhaustion. I happened to see a cave on

the side of the cliff and brought you here just now."

Good. Very good...very fortunate.

Dare I ask exactly how you had the luck to carry a person in a dead faint to this cave while we were falling?

"Actually, my martial arts skills aren't bad."

I spat.

"What's wrong? Do you feel unwell somewhere?"

I viciously used my sleeves to wipe my mouth and slowly closed my eyes. He'd enraged me enough to spit blood. This guy was perfectly capable of escaping from danger but decided to rely on me. Now look, we were both ruined and stuck in this dreary place.

—

Inside the cave, an icy wind blew past, making me shiver. I bent down into a crouch and tried to feel about me, but he looped me by the waist and forced me into his lap, looking about to laugh as he spoke in a serious tone. "You've been unconscious for half the day. Don't move around, we should share body warmth since it's cold at night."

I fell silent, not because of what he said, but because I discovered I couldn't call forth a trace of qi from within my body. Something was very

wrong.

"Shao'er, why is your body so cold?" He seemed worried as he felt about me.

"Seems like I'm plaguing you with cares," I pushed aside his hands and closed my eyes for a while, before quietly asking, "We've already been forced off a cliff. Have you figured out who was targeting you yet?"

He frowned, muttering to himself for a while before slowly replying. "I'm sorry for dragging you into it."

...I laughed bitterly.

As I suspected, this person wouldn't drag me back to the palace without reason. If people could even hurt the emperor, who knew how Fang Hua had passed his days? I guessed the news of my disaster would've reached the young Princes by now. Things must be chaotic back at the house.

"Nothing will happen. Roughly around dawn, people will come to rescue us."

I remained feebly in his embrace, staring at him with a half-smile. "Even on an inspection tour, the emperor has treacherous ministers planning his assassination? Looks like your rule hasn't been all smooth and steady."

He lifted his eyes to look at me, the expression as if to say, how did you know?

Of course I knew. My palm hadn't harmed the assassin in the slightest. Even without adequate internal energy, the results shouldn't have turned out like that. Thinking back, the feeling I had then...there was definitely armor hidden beneath his robes, and he looked like an experienced fighter. Maybe he was even the soldier of some general.

No one from the jianghu would dare to provoke me.

Right now, I was more worried about the Princes. They were famous figures in the jianghu, each one filled with determination to protect their Master. It was doubtful that they'd let matters rest if they couldn't find me. I gave a vague glance at Han Zichuan's calm expression, coupled with his leisurely posture, and thought it a bit odd. He didn't seem a bit anxious. Did he mean to borrow the strength of the young Princes to kill rebellious, would-be assassins?

A sudden burst of pain filled my chest, and I looked away, sucking in a deep breath. Calm...I had to stay calm.

"Though Zhen ascended the throne as the emperor, military power has always been beyond my grasp. There are plenty of people who wish to rebel as well." he swept his gaze over me, finally deigning to explain. Even the emperor's carriage had been sabotaged, these ambitious rebels were really too bold.

Hey...

I slowly struggled free and grabbed the front of his jacket, sullen. "And you're just letting them conspire against you like this?!"

"Shao'er, are you showing concern for me." he peered at me tenderly, the question turning into a statement of certainty on his lips. I gave him a stunned look before turning away, paralyzed with rage.

The current officials actually dared to send assassins after the emperor on his inspection tour. Such an open, brazen display of actions was not only crude and rash, but stupid. They seemed to have no thought for the consequences, perhaps because Han Zichuan had forced them to this point.

I should have realized it earlier...the person before me now had killed his own father while he was still a crown prince. He wasn't a leader you could provoke easily. Though, if it was just his internal affairs, why drag an innocent person like me into the mess? Wasn't this unfair? Unjust?

Tears...

Meanwhile, he kept staring and smiling at me, heart filled with happiness as he held me in his lap and took a breath. "Are you worrying about me again? When you told me to not let go no matter what at the cliff, I knew...even if everyone in the world was plotting against me, you wouldn't. My Shao'er is still the same as before..."

If I could turn back time, I'd drop you without hesitation.

He held my face in his hands as he looked me up and down, eyebrows furrowed. "What's wrong with your face, it's so pale. Did you suffer some internal injuries?"

This guy, I was ready to sling him over my shoulder and throw him off the cliff. He only just realized I had internal injuries. Isn't this a bit too slow?

Endure it...

"If you hold me any tighter, I'll die faster." I stared straight at him, forcing out my words.

He nestled closer in embarrassment, the hands around my waist neither loosening nor tightening. After a while, they rested over my shoulders as he came to a decision, "Zhen has methods. Zhen will treat your injuries for you."

I gave a start.

When he used the word "Zhen," I had a premonition.

"No..." No need.

But the hands on my shoulders were like iron. I was seized with panic as he turned over and pressed me beneath him. As soon as I prepared to use my internal energy, he spoke. "If you don't want to die early, then stop fiddling around with your internal energy."

Hey, why did his lines sound so familiar? He...h-h-he, why was he copying me?

I grew blank. He gave me a slow, careful look while I docilely stayed on the ground. His words were right. I'd felt that something was wrong with my internal energy as soon as we fell off the cliff, but what treatment was he thinking of using? Even as I stared at him, he remained calm, circulating his own qi as he touched me with his palm. Burning qi streamed through my robes to enter me, pure and vigorous, but it only made my head feel numb. If I knew he was going to channel true qi inside me, I wouldn't have listened to him.

Pah, what a lousy idea.

I resisted the tumultuous sensations within my chest with difficulty, suppressing and rejecting the stream of true qi as I turned over and pushed him aside. He seemed at a loss as he tried to move over and pull at me. "What happened, did I do it incorrectly?"

"That's right. That's very right..."

If he gave me any more true qi, it'd damage my internal organs and cause my body to burst. He eased me into his embrace and curved his eyes into a smile, hands resting on my shoulders to repeat the process. I couldn't bear it anymore and leaned forward, spitting up a mouthful of blood.

"Shao'er, what's happened to you..?" his voice shook, severely disturbed.

I pulled my mouth into a grin. "Nothing. Just let me sleep for awhile and stop fussing over me. My cultivation way is different from the rest, wavering between yang and yin. I can't endure the usual..."

He couldn't nod his head fast enough as he mutely held me in his arms. The wind was very strong by the cliffside that night, but he leaned his head against the crags, stubbornly holding on to me. A chilly moon hung against the horizon, and the gale billowed out our sleeves.

"Zichuan, did you know beforehand that someone would attack the carriage?"

He used a bit of strength to rest me between his knees, stroking my hair as he answered. "I'm not an Immortal, how would I know these things?" He closed his eyes as if preparing to doze. I smiled in response. That's true...he wasn't an Immortal.

At the very least, an Immortal wouldn't tell lies.

Despite his warmth, I couldn't fall asleep. Both my heart and my body felt extremely uncomfortable. Second had spoken correctly. From the start, I shouldn't have cultivated the Carefree Recollection. My true qi had suffered damage and now my own internal energy was attacking me. It wasn't something a human could bear, and an extremely difficult trial to surmount. My eyes remained open while my thoughts drifted, until enough time passed for his breaths to turn low and even.

"...Zichuan." He remained unresponsive.

I shifted a bit, only hesitating briefly before rolling up my sleeves and digging through his robes. It was easy to fish out the bundle of silk from inside. Opening it up, I found the pills he had hidden away from me...as well as a single paper charm. Smiling softly, I smoothed out the crumpled

charm before folding it into a paper crane. Then I put it in my lap and stroked it, watching the passing wind make its wings tremble. My other hand held the pill to my nose for an experimental sniff.

Should I or shouldn't I take it?

—

Second said eating it would not only suppress, but dissolve the rest of the internal energy in my body. Even if I didn't eat it, my internal energy had already been heavily depleted. Now it was even rising up and attacking me, making me doubtful whether I'd live to see the sun tomorrow. My heart was doing flip-flops, and I felt extremely tired.

But if I ate it, then wouldn't that mean...?

My smile was bitter. Preserving my life was more important. I hadn't even seen Fang Hua yet, so how could I shut my eyes and pass away so easily?

I placed it in my mouth. The slightly acrid flavor of the drug spread out across my tongue. I cradled the paper crane in my hands and dug up the remaining traces of my memory to wave my fingers, casting an incantation. The paper crane started moving its wings, and suddenly flew off to disappear into the horizon...while I leaned against the rocks and smiled.

Little one, take this message to my Princes. Tell them not to worry, and if I fall into Han Zichuan's hands, don't get drawn into the struggles of the

imperial court.

I sat leaning across the crags, slowly closing my eyes as dawn broke out in the east. Gradually, the sun rose to illuminate the dewdrops, heralding a new day...

—

I don't know how long I remained unconscious, or when it was that someone carried me out of the cave. Exhaustion had overtaken my body as if I would die at any moment. Beneath me, soft silken bedcovers slipped and slid like water as they jolted incessantly. Dimly, I could hear a voice murmuring by my ear.

"After we enter the palace, Zhen won't let anything hurt you..."

That person must have been bending over me, because his breathing was very near...

There was a soft laugh, the breath unbelievably ticklish. A warm hand rested on my head, the dexterous fingers softly stroking my hair. Before I even opened my eyes, I could smell the scent of rain-kissed bamboo. This was exactly like the scent from my childhood home. There used to be someone who extremely liked that smell. Back then, Han Zichuan used to say it was dull that everything smelled like bamboo, but I liked it immensely because it cleared the heart and refreshed the body.

I felt very tired, wavering between sleeping and alertness. My head felt rather muddled, and every time I tried to think, it was like grasping at

strands of silk that escaped from my fingers. In the darkness, a figure dressed in white appeared before me, clear yet indistinct as he floated farther and farther away.

The pain this sight caused me was tremendous.

No...

I suddenly opened my eyes.

"What is it?" someone asked in a steady voice.

I blinked once, not knowing what was the matter. I only knew I was uncomfortable but not the reason why...and my head...my head felt like it was on the verge of exploding. The light was very dim, and the room was unfamiliar...it was very spacious, and couldn't be called a room, but a grand hall.

A faint scent of bamboo drifted through the air, restful and calm. I was lying on something soft, breathing heavily as I stared at the ceiling. Beyond the layers of flickering candlelight and embroidered lotuses on muslin gaze, I could vaguely see the forms of auspicious flying dragons. The curtains around my bed seemed like they were going to bury me alive, and I felt a sudden rush of panic...

Was this the imperial palace? Why was I here?

I was utterly confused, my hands groping about and crumpling the brocade covers...my limbs felt numb as if every inch was being gnawed

on by ants, and complete fatigue had overtaken my body, making it hard to use any strength.

“Shao’er? What’s wrong with you, don’t scare me.”

Someone was holding my face and patting it. His actions seemed to be conflicted, afraid to use too little force to wake me, or too much force to hurt me. Those pretty eyebrows were all knotted up, yet it did nothing to mar the heroic beauty of his face.

Who...was he?

Ah, that’s right...I closed my eyes and dimly thought for a bit.

He’s Han Zichuan, the current reigning emperor.

“Someone, go call the imperial physician. You’re all more useless than the dead.”

My chest felt stuffy, and it felt like a cloud of true qi was rising up from my abdomen. Shoot...of all the times for a flare-up, it had to happen now. My vision turned black, and I lost awareness for a while.

—

When I recovered my senses, I felt a hand checking my pulse. One of my arms was resting on a pillow, and the air was very cold. I twitched my finger a few times before I regained some feeling. Who knew how long

that person had been examining me? I only felt that his whole body was shaking, as if he feared this cold even more than I did. Or not...perhaps he was shaking from fear.

My illness couldn't be counted as an illness, but a result of my cultivation.

Add that to the fact that I'd incurred internal injuries, then the pill I'd eaten must have yet to take effect, or else I wouldn't have remembered this much. I next felt someone scooping me up into their arms, their movements exceptionally gentle. He blew on a cup of water for a long while before handing it over to me. I had no strength to take it, nor did I want to drink.

I only stared at the cup, which seemed determined to stay until I accepted it. Very reluctantly, I scooted over and took a shallow sip. It was cool and refreshing, and the cold slipped into my stomach to suppress the churning currents of nameless qi inside. This water was probably dosed with some medicines for focus and calming qi, so I lowered my head and drank some more.

The person holding me seemed to relax and exhale as he watched. He placed the drink aside and wrapped his arms around me, chin resting on my shoulders as he looked at me with a vastly complicated expression. It was hard for me to take it all in, so I forced a weak smile.

"Imperial Physician, what's the meaning behind this illness? Why did she suddenly become like this?"

"To reply your Majesty," the old voice that spoke was so respectful, he

was one note away from bowing on the floor. He didn't even dare to lift his head. "This, this..."

After all that time, he still didn't know what to call me by. This imperial physician wasn't even worth half of Nongyu's intelligent or eloquence. Though...who exactly was Nongyu...? I searched for awhile, using all my strength to think before I dimly recalled a face.

My head hurt...

I gave a soft groan. The hand around my waist tightened, as if troubled by my noise, and I shifted my body. Right, the emperor was holding me in his arms. I came to the palace this time because...

I tried to remember, but it only made me tired and uncomfortable. The currents of qi still trapped in my chest were still fighting each other, twisting and turning left and right to give me no peace.

"Are you going to say it or not?" There was a pah! and the sound of something shattering.

"To reply your Majesty, the lady possesses an extremely abnormal pulse. Your servant has never encountered such a condition, but it seems that she's suffered severe internal injuries. Her true qi is leaking from her body, making her pulse fluctuate between moments of yang strength and yin weakness. In one moment, she possesses internal energy; in the next, it is gone. Your servant is really unsure of what to do beyond writing a few prescriptions to bolster the body and adjust her breathing. The rest will require a few more days of observation before medicine can be given."

What 'qi is leaking' nonsense?

I'm suppressing internal energy so it won't flare up and attack me and you dare to randomly prescribe me medicine? Wait until I'm better, if I see you've messed me up anywhere...I'll cripple you. How dare this guy try to show his skills before an expert, my medical knowledge...

Do I know medicine?

How irritating, it felt like more of my memories...were slowly slipping away, no matter how I try to hold on...

An angry voice spoke a few words above my head, his chest heaving with the effort. I couldn't even rest against him quietly, but shook in the wake of his movements. So uncomfortable...

My mind was in disarray. Why were they so noisy? I fumbled about until I found the source of the voice and found a hand, soft and warm like a cocoon. I tugged it to the side of my head, my eyebrows pressed together. He seemed to recover some tact as deft fingers massaged my temples with soft strokes. "What are you all standing around in a daze for? Hurry up and bring over the medicine."

—

A pungent smell assailed my nostrils.

I didn't know what it was, but unconsciously, I knew that I didn't want to drink it. My face turned away as I buried myself in his chest. There was a

tight laugh, mixed with notes of doting and helplessness. He said a few more things that I couldn't hear, and pushed against my shoulders a few times. I didn't want to acknowledge him. A pair of hands slipped past my face and brought something warm to my lips.

I wanted to dodge, but someone pinched my nose. I was already feeling congested with a headache...

Sullenly, I opened my mouth to breathe as a spoonful of something was slipped inside. Before I could spit it out, the warm liquid slid down my throat, and I half choked. I was too surprised to even open my eyes. I could only feel a churning in my stomach as I clutched the front of his robes, feeling the bitter taste in my mouth shifting flavors as something else surged upwards...I couldn't hold it back, and raised my head to spit it out.

The air was suddenly filled with a strange, raw smell...

I narrowed my eyes and studied the man before me. Both his robes and face were flecked with red, and his eyes were exceptionally bright as he looked at me, disturbed and terrified. Looks like I'd frightened him.

It's over...

I'd spat out blood.

I just knew I couldn't take the prescription from that muddlehead doctor...why did you feed me anyways?

Great... Just great.

I closed my eyes with a frown, holding his robes in a posture of grievous discontent...and lost consciousness again. The funny thing was, I remembered First's words to me before my eyes shut. He said that practicing this form of cultivation would bring me trouble sooner or later. The Carefree Recollection seemed like warm water, but was actually a raging flame that forced the internal energy to alternate between periods of gentle calm and ferocious activity. If the practitioner incurred heavy internal injuries, then when the gentle cycle ended, the vicious qi would claim their life...

To remember without sorrow, the Carefree Recollection.

It mixed the cultivator's internal energy with their memories, imbibing the strength of one with the other. If all the internal energy dissipated, then all the memories would follow, leaving everything a blank slate.

But what choice did I have? I couldn't just stand by while Han Zichuan was in danger, even if saving him hurt me. First probably expected this when he packed the qi dispersing pills in my things. Though...I never expected that I'd have to use them so soon.

No matter what, I had to stay alive until I saw Fang Hua. It's fine if I lose my memories. As long as I can see him once, as long as he still remembers me, then I'll be content.

What kind of scene would play out the next time we met?

Maybe I'd stop grieving. Maybe I could smile at him without misgivings and say softly, 'This young lord is exceedingly handsome. Where are you from? Where do you live?'

Even though my mind was dazed and confused, I managed a tired smile.

Chapter 43

A rustling noise of something like silk reached my ears, making me feel unbearably itchy. It sounded like some people were purposely speaking in whispers in a great hall.

"Where is the emperor?"

"He went to court."

"Amitabha[1], he's been absent for three days, and now he's finally going. That's right...has the person inside awakened yet? Can I take a look? I heard this Master has an impressive background. The emperor's been by her side since the first day she arrived."

"Speak softer."

"Why should I, isn't she dead asleep? Even the imperial physician said it's not likely she'll wake up again." The voice drew closer and closer as it spoke. There was the sound of someone lifting a sleeve and drawing aside what sounded like cloth. Though my eyes were closed, I could still feel my surroundings grow brighter, and a soft breeze blow in...the air grew fresh and unhindered.

It felt like coming back from the dead...though my hands felt weak as ever.

Where was I...?

"I told you not to move the curtain, she's very delicate and fragile... don't give her a chill. There were a lot of imperial physicians executed recently. If you act without any propriety, be careful it's not our heads that roll next time."

There was a pained cry as someone dragged the figure away by his ear while he pleaded for mercy. Abruptly, the light dimmed into the dreary atmosphere of the dead.

No, I don't want this...

Don't...don't take away my light. My heart wailed mournfully as my hand reached towards the silk curtains, twisting them aside as I straightened up.

I opened my eyes.

Subconsciously, I craned my head and felt at the offensive material of the curtain. A ray of light pierced through to shine on my fingers, lifeless and pallid to an offensive point.

It suddenly became quiet outside.

Those two people seemed thoroughly frightened, trembling as they watched me shaking to open the bed curtains. After being used to the dark for so long, this sudden light was unbearable and I squinted for quite a while, my mind buzzing until I recovered. I gave them a gentle

smile. The two exchanged glances with ashen faces before prostrating themselves on the ground. With their identical ash blue robes and horse-hoof sleeves, they were probably young eunuchs.

"We've disturbed Master's peace and quiet, please punish us, Master." the steadier of the two eunuchs spoke as he knocked their head repeatedly against the ground.

Just hearing this sound was insufferable. Did he think his head was cast from copper? I clicked my tongue, looking away when I saw a hint of red. What peace and quiet? Pah, I'm not dead yet.

"You're making my eyes hurt moving up and down like that, so get up." I waved my hand and tried to rise, but felt strange when my hands touched the bedding. The material was exquisite, thick and soft. It was embroidered with beautiful clouds and dragons, but I didn't recall it being so tasteful. In my house...

Huh? How come I couldn't remember a thing?

I blinked a few times, staring at the equally curious pair of eunuchs, and asked them, "Where am I?"

"To reply Master, this is his majesty's sleeping chambers."

Oh...

His majesty.

The emperor's sleeping chambers, then.

What?!

My breath caught, and I wanted to get off the bed that instant, but my body was simply too weak. I paused to rest for a while before setting my toes on the floor, but it felt like I was standing on cotton. Before I could steady myself on my feet, my body swayed, and someone came to support me.

"Master, if you want anything, just tell us. Please don't get off the bed yourself," the cleverer of the two eunuchs spoke as he examined my complexion, gently pulling me back as he waved a hand behind him. "What are you dawdling for, go call his majesty and tell him Master's awakened."

Ah...

Call his majesty? Don't...

I...I'm afraid...afraid of strangers.

How did I end up on the imperial dragon bed? What happened here, and why couldn't I remember anything? I furiously slapped my head, scaring the person next to me. He wanted to stop me, yet didn't dare, hands hovering beneath mine.

Was he waiting to catch something, or what?

It couldn't be that he was waiting to collect the hairs that fell off my head after I beat myself up?

Weirdo...

"Master, are you feeling unwell anywhere?"

A little...let me think.

I raised my head as someone inserted a soft cushion behind my back to make me comfortable. My body shifted a few times before I spoke, "I have no energy in my body, find myself short of breath when speaking, and my stomach's burning with pain. Oh...hey, uh, Little Second, take my pulse for me."

"To reply Master, your servant's name isn't Little Second," he bowed in extreme respect, reaching out with his hands to tuck me in.

I was at a loss.

"Is that so...I just blurted out whatever was on my mind, my memory's not so clear."

"Master, you're probably confused because you're hungry. You've been unconscious for three days, but we've only dared to give you some soup. Please close your eyes and rest for a while, I'll instruct the imperial

kitchen to prepare some food right away.” Still bowing, he carefully backed away and left.

Three days?!

Curses, no wonder I was so hungry. I was even experiencing double vision, so I thought I had bad eyesight... I gave a ridiculing laugh and closed my eyes.

—

Soft footsteps pattered towards me, so light I wouldn't have heard them if I wasn't paying attention. I lifted my eyes to see a small wooden serving table set on the bed, followed by various fragrant, delicious dishes. There was someone standing against the light in the doorway, quietly watching the young eunuchs entering in single file.

The delicious aroma enticed me to crack my eyes open.

“Come, Master. Please try this warm porridge first.” the same eunuch from before spoke, and I hnn'd in agreement. My energy was just about gone, and it felt extremely comfortable to lean against a soft cushion, half-awake as I opened my mouth and waited to be fed...

But a long time passed without me getting any food.

I frowned, and just when I was about to open my eyes, I felt a space on the bed next to me sink down. Someone drew near me, and a smooth, warm object brushed against my lips while the person blew against its

surface.

I sipped a tiny mouthful.

The porridge was thick and glutinous, carrying with it a faint fragrance. The level of saltiness was just right, and it was easy to swallow once I had it in my mouth. The taste lingered by my teeth for a long time afterward. I wanted to eat more, but that person didn't move, mystifying me.

I lazily opened my eyes and saw that the person holding the bowl and spoon before me wasn't a eunuch.

Why did I know?

He clearly had a Adam's apple and traces of stubble by his chin, though it was a bit wan. Firm eyebrows framed a pair of tender eyes, making him hard to describe...at any rate, he was an outstandingly handsome man.

He fed me another spoonful.

I didn't swallow, but couldn't help but dodge to one side.

He raised his eyebrows, and the eunuchs around his prostrated their shaking bodies to the floor in dreadful fear. The man's lips turned up, his smile warm and intimate as he softly urged, "Drink it, it'll bolster your body."

The tone was light but carried an unmistakable force. Very few people

could turn a simple suggestion into something that sounded like a threat, but he was one of them. I was a little dazed. My eyes fixed on him and his hand, still holding the spoon. The color of his sleeves was a bold yellow, embroidered with flying dragons in gold thread.

I blinked, moving my gaze downwards before I realized he was dressed in yellow from head to toe.

I was lying on the dragon bed, being personally fed porridge by the emperor?!

T-t-this...what was going on?

"What's wrong? This expression...you look like I'm feeding you arsenic." his face turned wooden and his eyebrows arched, though there was still laughter in his eyes. "It's going to turn cold, you should drink it up before it does."

I braced myself and took the bowl from his hands, hesitating slightly before draining the contents in one gulp. The man seemed as if he'd seen something unexpected, looking at me as if floored. He turned his head aside and muttered to himself, "What's the matter, she really drank what I gave her..."

Did I do something wrong?

He was the emperor. Even if he gave me arsenic, I'd have no choice but to drink it, right? I used my sleeve to wipe my mouth and stole a glance at him. His smile seemed full of meaning as he looked at me in silence,

turning my entire body cold.

I lowered my eyes and crawled out from the covers until I was kneeling on the bed. After that bout of illness, my movements were still natural and spontaneous, clean and complete. "Your Majesty, I can't remember anything, nor do I know how I ended up lying here...anyways, if it's taking responsibility or rebuking, come at me outright. You don't need this policy of comforting me first and punishing me later, I don't even know what I did."

Why would I be lying on this bed? What kind of status did I have? I couldn't remember anything.

"Shao'er, what's happened to you?"

A pair of hands rested on my shoulders, shifting me slightly. The fabric draped around me like a cocoon, similar to the feeling I'd gotten from my dreams these past days. I could remember these large palms stroking my forehead and my face, over and over again.

His voice was a little hoarse as he spoke. "Why does it seem like you've become a completely different person after waking up?"

I looked at him in astonishment. It seemed like...this person had no intentions to hurt me. Could it be that I misunderstood? He propped himself against the bed to lean over and study me with unblinking eyes that hid a smile.

"You don't remember what you came to the palace for?"

I was ignorant. So I hadn't always been part of the imperial court?

"Think a bit, besides me...was there anyone else you wanted to see?" his voice was calm and filled with warmth.

I looked at him, sensing that he was truly trying to guide me along. Within the court, women dreamed of seeing the emperor everyday. Could there be anyone else? Was it possible that this person discovered me in an affair and wanted to surprise me with his knowledge? But that's not right. If I had been discovered, could I still sit so harmlessly on the dragon bed and get personal treatment from the emperor?

What a tangled mess...

"If you can't remember, there's no need to waste your efforts," A pair of hands brushed my forehead, smoothing it out. His mood seemed to have lightened as he raised his voice. "Someone call the imperial physician."

—

Some old guy turned up.

I'd never seen him before, but I hadn't crossed paths with many people. As to the people and furnishings in this great hall, I had no impressions of them in my memories. Numbly, I watched as he examined my pulse, pinching the area as he kept muttering to himself. Then he reverently prostrated himself on the ground and said a whole bunch of stuff, but it was more or less that my vital energy passageways were obstructed, and

there was qi in my heart; my body was feeble, I lacked adequate qi and blood...finally he cast an uncertain glance at me and added that all of these had temporarily caused my amnesia.

I think this guy was just spouting off a load of bull.

It was complete nonsense.

Though I had no proof...

The emperor's eyes had never left my face, as if trying to find clues in my expression. I straightened my clothes and sat properly before staring back, but he broke the gaze to ask the imperial physician, "When will she be cured?"

"The body can be nursed to health, but...there's no telling when her memory will recover. Your servant cannot help your majesty resolve this difficulty and deserves to die." The white-haired old man knocked his head against the floor, body shivering.

But the emperor was in excellent spirits as he waved his hand. "Someone, take him to fill out the prescription. Reward him with two hundred taels of gold."

I was shocked speechless. He was so liberal with his money.

It didn't take long before someone carried in a bowl of liquid medicine. I gave a sniff and sneered. This was a harmless prescription that couldn't hurt the body. Its ingredients were all precious, expensive medicines that

would neither alleviate my illnesses nor cure me completely.

Huh, how did one whiff send a whole list of ingredient names tumbling into my head...? I crinkled my brows and stared at the bowl of black-colored soup. I was very familiar with its makeup...

"What is it, is there anything wrong?" On the side, the emperor drew closer, sitting personally by the edge of the bed with a hand on my leg. I felt a bit repulsed, but...since I was lying on his bed, I let it pass.

"Definitely wrong," I nodded, looking straight at him. "From the time since I've woke, it's been nothing but soups and liquids. I'm...hungry."

He gave a sudden laugh at my unexpected answer.

"The dishes are all on the table, it's not as if you're not allowed to eat. Unless...you still want me to feed you?"

Che, this person, the Son of Heaven, was so imposing. Even with him just sitting there, I didn't dare to eat first.

"And I thought your personality changed. Your old habit of criticizing others is still the same." The emperor's voice carried an unmistakable cheer and warmth as he picked up a pair of jade chopsticks.

A court lady on the side immediately stepped forward with a curtesy. "Your servant shall serve you."

He handed the chopsticks over and pointed at various dishes: 'Oh, bring her some fish in bamboo shoots, also some slow-cooked chicken with lily bulbs...right, that section of leg there is her favorite.'

I was completely tongue-tied. Looking at the tasty dishes that were brought before my lips, I had to swallow my drool. The emperor gave me a "kindly"[2] look with raised eyebrows, as if to tell me he'd feed me personally if I didn't eat. The jade chopsticks came through to offer me a piece of chicken wrapped around a white bamboo shoot glistening with oil. It looked delicious. I obediently took a bite and chewed it.

It was so good that my eyes squeezed shut...I felt like I could even eat my tongue. Not a bit greasy, but tasty and refreshing. The flavor levels were just right. How long had it been since I tasted something like this...?

Afterwards, the other dishes served my way all turned out to be things I liked to eat. With my appetite whetted, I actually ate two bowls of rice. The emperor seemed to be hungry too, and drank a bowl of porridge to accompany me. It was very odd. He was so familiar with my likes and favorites. I blew on a hot cup of tea in my hands and carefully took a sip. How invigorating.

"Your Majesty..." I lifted my eyes to look at him. "I heard I've just entered the palace recently. Exactly what kind of person am I?"

He seemed a bit blank, and looked at me with a strange expression. Before his gaze, I replaced the teacup back on the table.

What a joke. If I didn't ask, wouldn't I be an idiot? I'd slept enough and ate enough, it was time for proper matters.

He propped himself up against the bed and scooted over, voice exceptionally mild. "You're already on Zhen's bed, who else could you be?"

"A woman," I replied.

"Yes," he raised his eyes and gave me a meaningful smile, taking the chance to tuck me in as he spoke slowly. "It's a long story, but suffice to say, you're Zhen's empress."

I did a spit-take.

—

It was my turn to be agape. I stared blankly at him, but he just lowered his head to grasp my hand, a small smile playing about his lips. The imposing aura of an emperor had disappeared to be replaced with an easy, intimate air. It was difficult to meet his gaze, which gave me an indescribable feeling...I hastily averted my eyes.

This was the dragon bed. I frowned slightly...

It was absolutely true that I woke up on here. Even if I was a mere concubine in the imperial harem, this was an exceptional favor. Inwardly, I puzzled things out as I lowered my head to touch the silks.

But I was his woman?

His face didn't seemed to be lying, and his tone was fair and reasonable. Still, it felt...this wasn't the case, though I couldn't figure out which part was off. His intimacy felt a little foreign to me. Hey, I say... where's he touching with those hands? I carefully withdrew my leg and hid it securely beneath the covers.

Inside the huge room, the flames were dazzling. At some point in time, the servants had all disappeared, leaving just the two of us. The atmosphere was a bit strange. His eyes were very bright. I could tell from his expression that he wasn't angry at my sudden show of disrespect, but gave him an uncertain glance. Though we hadn't interacted much, I was pretty certain he wouldn't try to trick me. Moreover, he couldn't even bear to hurt me while I was severely ill...that thought made me release a breath and feel more relieved.

I curled up within the boundaries of my bedding. Even though I'd just woken up, I still felt sleepy. Eating a full meal really...made it hard to keep my eyes open. I propped up my body and reclined against the headboard, thoughts tangled as I spoke. "Why did I suddenly get so ill? Has my body always been so weak?"

He gave me a stiff look, hands stroking my hair as if he held tender feelings that were difficult to express. There was a distressed look in his eyes as he heaved a sigh and drew me into his arms, speaking in a low voice. "This was all Zhen's fault. Those people...Zhen won't forgive them."

His gaze was as calm as ice, seven parts fierce and three parts sharp.

My eyebrows pressed together as I huddled into that warmth. My body

that had been braced taut like a spring eventually learned to relax. It looked like things weren't all that peaceful in the court, there were still premeditated murder plots floating about. If the victim was a favorite concubine, then there were probably no shortage of threats.

Curses...so much for freedom and leisure.

I tightened my grip minutely on his cuffs and asked, "As your majesty's woman, which level of the imperial harem would chenqie[3] belong to?"

I couldn't stay on the dragon bed for the rest of my life, right? Once I'd rested enough, I'd have to return to wherever I came from so the other women wouldn't resent me. Otherwise, as an imperial concubine, I'd have to spend the night engaging in the merry, amorous passions of a man and woman. Even if I shrank in a corner to study pornography books, that wouldn't be an excuse.

He seemed surprised. "Giving you status is easy enough. How about guifei, the highest ranking imperial concubine?" The emperor held my hand, stroking it a few times as he leaned back and said, "Bestowing the title is a little troublesome since the imperial palace relies on different sources of power for influence. But it's not impossible."

What...

This guy, were all emperors so easygoing?

But that couldn't be right. My head felt a bit dizzy, and I muddled around in the dark until I felt a strand of thought leading me to a door...

Let me think a bit.

"Qieshen has been lying on the emperor's bed for two or three days and am your majesty's empress. But I didn't have any official status until now?" I lifted my eyes, muttering indecisively as I felt the robes beneath my hands. The material was satiny soft, the Son of Heaven really wore things 1,000 times, 10,000 times better than ordinary people. I raised my head to look at him, my smile somewhat chilly. "Just entering the palace for a few days and getting ill can earn a place as the emperor's highest rank imperial concubine?"

Was that his meaning?

Our eyes met, and his mouth seemed to tremble, though the rest of his face didn't move. His eyes gleamed as he looked at me with a smile that wasn't a smile, asking lightly, "Who told you these things?"

My eyes drifted into the distance until they settled on somewhere outside the rooms, where the two little eunuchs were kneeling on the ground. His electric gaze swept over, filled with the overwhelming aura of an emperor. Even at this distance, it felt like I could hear those servants tremble, their teeth chattering as they prostrated on the ground, too fearful to even ask for mercy.

He gave a snort, and I felt a bit uneasy.

No matter how easygoing, this man was still the emperor. How could I show off so much and go against him? I tried to move the bedcovers aside, but was stopped by his hand.

"Silly." The emperor didn't avoid my gaze, but looked at me directly, calm and composed. His eyes were like a serene pond.

The gaze made me feel a bit timid. Had I thought wrongly?

Those two had clearly said that the emperor hadn't gone to court for three days, and that he'd been by my side since the first day I arrived at the palace. So where had I been before that? If I'd just entered the palace, why would the emperor know so much about my habits and favorite things?

He sucked in a breath. "You only know how to go off into flights of fancy everyday." Though his voice slowed, he really did start explaining things to me.

"...we met while I was still a crown prince in exile among the common people. After ascending the throne, I looked for you for a very long time." He held me as he stroked my hair with soft touches. "That's why we're a couple."

He'd stopped referring to himself as Zhen, and reverted back to the commonplace "I". It made me feel...perplexed.

But his embrace really was very nice and warm. I could smell the faint scent of bamboo, one of my favorites, and that beating heart—was it for me? It was pounding so quickly, the vibrations feeling like they'd pass through my own skin.

"Shao'er, you actually ended up forgetting everything."

My body relaxed as he held me, mouth smoothing into an expression of comfort. His head lowered to look at me, those clear, penetrating eyes like rays of moonlight. It was very peaceful around us.

Suddenly, a few court ladies entered in single file, holding something in their hands. Surprised, I straightened up, but he pressed me back down with a smile to lean in and speak. "You've slept for so long, you must be tired. I had someone prepare your favorite bath of medicinal herbs."

And then?

I squinted at him. His bearing was exceptionally fine, smiling as he pointed at an area behind a folding screen.

What kind of joke is this? Take a bath?

Here?!

Curses, a girl like me wasn't going to sell her body and act like some lady from an entertainment house.

"Master, your servants will wait upon you," Two or three court ladies came to take my hands and help me over. A soft laugh came from behind me.

"Take good care of her for Zhen, or else I'll put you all on the spot."

[1] Amitayus (阿彌陀佛) — Buddhist exclamation that means “may Buddha preserve us,” “Buddha be praised.” [2] kindly (和善) — heshan, a pun that doesn’t work quite well outside of Chinese. Heshan means to be “kind and gentle, genial,” but was also a the formal, traditional term for taking a meal. [3] chenqie (臣妾) — a personal pronoun for a lower-ranked female, equivalent to ‘your servant.’ [4] qieshen (妾身) — “concubine”, another form of self address/personal pronoun, formerly used by a wife when speaking to her husband.

Chapter 44

The folding screen wasn't very wide, but I didn't realize such a scene existed behind it. A simple and unsophisticated wooden bookshelf displayed a tracing of a landscape painting to accompany the screen, creating a cleverly sheltered space...

There was a pool emanating a fog that smelled like medicine. The scent was comfortable and refreshing here as I sank into the water. I could see the emperor sitting calmly on the bed beyond the screens, whose layers were as thin as cicada's wings. He was holding a rolled-up object of some sort, reading it leisurely before raising his eyes to smile at me.

I nearly ducked my entire face underwater.

Steam rose up from around my body, turning the skin of my neck red. My head felt muddled as I perched by the edge of the pool. I say, it's only been a few days since I've washed. Was I really that dirty?

I gave a bitter look to the court ladies scrubbing me up and down as if they were trying to give me a second skin. It's not as if I was a corpse, this skin was still high quality...

One after the other, docile faces wore innocent, pitiful expressions as they knelt by the edge of the pool. I softened, but then...why did they scrub even harder than before? This level of torment was enough to break my poor waist.

My face turned wooden as I felt extremely tragic, casting a glance beyond the screens. I could see the vague form of the emperor leaning against the bed, leisurely flipping through a book without even lifting his head. "Why don't I heard the sound of water? Use all your strength to scrub for Zhen."

"Yes."

"Dont'don'tdon't..." I hastily protested, pushing myself to the center of the pool. The figure beyond the screens moved slightly, and stopped turning the pages.

Softly, a voice laced with a smile drifted my way. "If their coarse movements are causing you pain, Zhen can take the trouble to replace them."

He actually put aside the book and made his way to get off the bed. He was just waiting to say this line, right? I fell silent, tired from my outburst from before, and lowered my head with gritted teeth to endure the ministrations of the scrubbing court ladies. Their hands felt like a thousand knives, and I kept my silent disapproval obvious.

Suddenly, a disturbance sounded from outside.

"Your excellency, esteemed excellency, you can't go in," Though the young eunuch spoke softly, his voice was unusually clear in the quiet surroundings. I was astonished.

Something soft hit against some wooden boards and a door opened

from the outside. The young eunuch kneeled on the ground, face pale as he clutched his stomach in silence. Sunlight framed a tall shadow that carried with him a strange, foreign scent of windswept sand and fresh blood. That man walked in with impatient steps. I could actually hear the sound of his sword scabbard clinking against his armor. Even weapons could be worn in the main hall, so close to the emperor?

There was the sound of someone kneeling on one knee.

"I received news that the emperor was attacked en route by assassins. Your servant is very much troubled at heart."

"My beloved official has just returned from the frontier pass, and should rest for a few more days." The emperor reached out a hand to help him up. "Zhen only met with a minor scare, there was nothing serious that happened."

I couldn't see very clearly through the hazy screen.

The two people went through the usual rites of ruler and vassal. Originally, it should be a pleasing sight, but why...did something feel off?

This general looked to be on in his years, hale and hearty with long experiences in the battlefields. His keen intuition noticed something was different right away as he looked in my direction. His face seemed to flash in surprise before his eyes sharpened, and an imposing manner followed his arched eyebrows.

This man could impertinently charge into the emperor's sleeping

quarters. He probably didn't have too many scruples. I wasn't nervous at all, but glared back at him. The emperor clapped him casually on the back to regain his attention, and the two talked softly for a while.

Soaking in a medicinal bath was good for health. Someone kept refilling the bath with hot water too, but...my skin had started to wrinkle from staying inside so long. How long were those two going to stay there?

"Your Majesty, regarding the matter of conferring the title of 'Empress' title on my daughter..."

What?

Now I was curious. I hid in the pool and cocked my ear to listen.

"We can discuss this matter in the future," the emperor's face seemed a little unhappy, but it was gone in a moment. He added, "This morning I received reports regarding the situation at the border. Come with Zhen into the study."

"At your Imperial Majesty's command[1]." But that person only gave a shallow bow in response.

The emperor's line of sight went past him to look at me, lips curving up into a gentle smile. As if...he was reassuring me. When the two of them walked past my screen, the general seemed to want to get a clearer picture.

"My beloved official," the emperor wore a smile that wasn't a smile as he quietly grabbed him by the arm. Tightening his grip, he dragged the old general off before the latter had a chance to look back.

I had the illusion that this general was a formidable figure. His eyes were so incisive and ruthless. And yet, was the emperor protecting me...?

—

Time enough to prepare a cup of time passed by.

I finally crawl out from the steaming hot pool to get dressed and have my hair done. The court ladies waiting upon me made sure I was properly attired before I valiantly charged out the doors, only to be followed by a quick-witted eunuch.

"Master, his Majesty said that you've yet to recover and to not recklessly wander about. The wind is fierce outside and you might catch a chill."

What?

The wind is fierce...catch a chill?

I raised a sleeve to shade my eyes as I looked up towards the warm sunshine.

"Even with strong sunlight, there's no guarantee that it isn't windy either. See here..." the young eunuch raised his hand and earnestly

pointed in one direction. Oh, well what do you know? The leaves on those little trees really were rocking and swaying.

I narrowed my eyes and looked at him. "You, what's your name?"

"Little Li."

"Good...very good, not bad." I stared at him and added silently that I'd remember this guy. He could even say a dead camel was a live horse[2], what a damnable gift, what a talented guy.

"What are you holding in your hands?"

"To answer Master, these are robes."

...looking at the style of these robes, it was definitely tailored for a man. They were snow-white but rather old, as if they'd been worn for a long time. The emperor wouldn't wear clothes like these. I narrowed my eyes at him.

"The laundry rooms delivered the wrong set, these are clothes for the disfavored lord in the Cold Palace."

Cold Palace?!

Disfavored lord...?

I nodded at him, before brushing my hands against the robes. Little Li's expression seemed fretful as he remained standing, head bowed in respectful deference.

Un, the material beneath my fingers was cold and slippery as water. Even though it was a bit old, the quality was still remarkably good. If even the Cold Palace clothes could be sent to the laundry rooms for laundering, the person there couldn't be too much out of favor.

I thought a bit before rolling up my sleeves and clapped him repeatedly on the shoulder. He trembled before steadying himself beneath my blows, head still bowed.

"Take me to stroll around for a while for exercise."

He hesitated a second before steeling himself to agree.

The air outside was very fresh. I stretched my arms beneath the fine, sunny day, but my mood seemed a little worse than it was at the beginning. My eyes couldn't help but glance towards Little Li and the robes in his hands. After walking a few more steps, I thoughtfully looked back. "Little Li, who was it that barged into the emperor's sleeping quarters just now? Why would they talking about conferring a title for an empress?"

"General Qi[3] rendered great services for the previous emperor in expanding territories. He is one of the dynasty's important founding

figures who holds vast military strength. Since his Majesty's ascended the throne, he has neither appointed an empress nor helped produce any sons, so petitions to the court have earnestly requested his Majesty to accept General Qi's daughter.."

Little Li stole a glance at me and trailed off, head bowed as he painstakingly folded and refolded the robes.

Eh, it was pretty understandable.

General Qi didn't seem like a person who would be content doing his duties. By acting in this way, the emperor could incur good will with him while preserving the security of his throne. It wasn't a bad idea. I drew into thought as I rested a hand on his shoulder for support. We hadn't taken more than a few more steps before I suddenly stopped.

Wind billowed the robes draped over his arms, imbued with a distinctive scent of something like medicine...but also like bamboo. A nostalgic feeling rose up within my heart.

"What's the deal with what you just said? There are only eunuchs and court ladies in the inner court. Are you telling me that there's an un-castrated male, too? Could he be the emperor's inner attendant?"

No, he shouldn't be in the Cold Palace if that was the case.

Little Li kept his head lowered and answered me with silence. I began to have doubts, looking around me as my suspicions grew. I took another step, and stopped. "Little Li, where did you take me for our stroll?"

This place looked like the quarters of the imperial harem...

But it felt like it was missing something.

My eyes travelled over to a pond filled with beautiful red lotuses before I asked him under my breath, "Where do the other concubines live? We've walked for so long, but all I've seen are lotus ponds, willow trees, or plants and flowers."

He didn't utter a word. Yet though his head was bowed, those eyes kept roving back and forth, filled with secret intelligence. He was probably thinking of what to say. My hand moved on his shoulder and pinched him.

His eyebrows bunched together, but he didn't dare to cry out.

"To...answer Master, his Majesty hasn't been interested in women during the past few years, so he never accepted any concubines."

Ah...

Not interested in women?!

Impossible. Such an amorous, licentious man. I'd remember how he'd kept by my side during my illness, hands feeling here and there. They'd never stopped moving for a second.

Hey, don't stop talking if I haven't interrupted you. I signaled him to go on with my eyes. He actually muttered and hummed forever before refusing to speak another word.

I laughed. "You're a devoted and loyal servant, you know when to keep your mouth shut. Good, very good!" A tolerant smile appeared on my features, but my force on his shoulder didn't lessen.

There were plenty of ways to pinch a person...

One was the martial pinch, where a finger held onto a section of skin while the wrist twisted to add pressure. The other was the scholarly pinch, more refined in comparison. The thumb and index fingers trapped a length of skin between them and gently pressed down, overwhelming the opponent.

A refined, delicate lady like myself would of course have to use orchid hands[4] when I employed my pinching method.

"Yeowowow...your servant will talk...isn't choosing to speak enough?!" He couldn't avoid me this time as his complexion turned deathly pale, face crumpled up like the wrinkled folds of a meat bun.

Speaking of meat buns, they were one of my favorite foods. I don't know if the imperial kitchens knew how to make them, but I liked to eat the ones with meat and Chinese cabbage filling. I came back to my senses in time to hear Little Li speaking.

"...so in all these five years, the emperor's never appointed anyone as a

concubine, but court ladies have entered the imperial palace as usual." he lifted his gaze when he finished the summary, and shut his mouth again.

Ah...

I didn't hear the beginning.

Never mind, since I'd heard the conclusion, I wouldn't look into the reasons. My eyes scanned our surroundings as I slightly raised my eyebrows. On the west side, there was an eunuch who looked away as he pretended to busy himself with a mat by the pond. I had to look a long while before I spotted a lotus seedpod in his hand. By the white jade railings, a group of court ladies quickly lowered their heads as they hurried along, too fearful to look at me again. I turned and saw a wet nurse leading along two nobly dressed children, half-pulling and half-dragging them as she urged them along, glancing back at me with every three steps.

I was wondering why they were looking at me like some sort of new playtoy.

As it turned out, I was a special case in all of these five years. The emperor said he'd confer upon me the title of...highest ranking imperial concubine.

Just a smidgen below the empress.

I was the only imperial concubine within the palace. As my thoughts reached this point, I raised my head and pointed ahead with a

handkerchief to say softly, "Take me strolling for a while longer." Then I walked on with small, delicate steps, spirited and full of mettle.

Exactly like...a turtledove with a phoenix feather stuck in her tail。

—

"Master, it's getting late. If his Majesty can't find you, he'll put the blame on me."

"Coming out for a walk refreshes the body. When we return I'll explain things so he doesn't penalize you." The area behind the lotus pond was quiet and secluded. I didn't know what kind of place it was so I wanted to have a look...

A body stepped forward to block me, scraping and bowing as the figure spoke in a voice so anxious it sounded like he was about to cry. "You've just recovered not long ago, why not continue your stroll tomorrow?"

I ignored him and stepped to the left. In a flash, he'd blocked me again. I stepped to the right...and met with the same result. Smiling, I asked him directly, "What's up ahead?"

"To reply Master, it's the Cold Palace. You're going to be conferred a title in a few days, so you definitely shouldn't visit such an unlucky place."

—

Cold Palace?

The rumored Cold Palace where someone once hung themselves with a white sash and died? Where you could sometimes still hear the sound of crying at night, and where strange shadows flitted through the halls?

Interesting.

I had difficulty controlling myself as I grabbed Little Li's sleeve and hauled him after me. I took a detour around the lotus pond and brushed aside some branches before speaking in an extremely secretive tone. "You have to take me there for a look to expand my horizons. I'll bear the responsibility on his Majesty's side."

His legs were already shaking as he shrank back, too afraid to remove my hand as his face fell into a fluster. There was an awkward look in his eyes as he stuttered out, "Master, this task isn't....i-i-isn't good, the emperor had instructions not to let you come to places like these, or else he'd break your servant's..."

"Aiya, you're such a coward," I waved my hand and pointed at a random spot. "There isn't even anyone here. If you won't talk, I won't either, and nobody will know."

Hm, something doesn't feel right.

It felt like I was touching something...my finger used some more strength and poked around, feeling something soft and springy as I

sensed a person behind me. The young eunuch was shocked as well, unable to speak as he looked behind me. My arm turned stiff as I fell silent, unsure of whether I should withdraw my finger first, or turn around. I stood in that awkward position, unmoving for a while until a voice sounded out behind me.

“For how long will this young Miss continue to poke me?”

—

“Excuse me for my impropriety.”

“It’s not a problem,” There was a hint of a smile in those words.

I lowered my head and pulled Little Li along, preparing to leave. But that person blocked my way. I saw a pair of black shoes and some rather worn robes, devoid of any accessories. It was extremely simple and unadorned, a rare sight for those dressed within the palace.

I turned away, but he blocked me again.

His figure looked delicate and weak, but he carried an imposing manner. Little Li seemed to be stupefied. I grew unhappy.

“What do you want to do?”

He laughed, speaking in a cheerful, blunt manner. “Young Miss, you’ve misunderstood. This humble one doesn’t want to do anything but reclaim

his clothes.”

His clothes?!

I took a look and saw him pointing at the old robes in Little Li’s arms. For a while I didn’t react, thinking things over before I slowly looked up at him...shocked. This was the disfavored lord from the Cold Palace?!

He had a very common-looking face, probably considered good-looking, and a pair of delicate, pretty eyebrows. He lacked a certain charm, though the air about him wasn’t bad...

He took the robes and gave me a slow smile. “Many thanks.”

When those ordinary features broke into a smile, they had an indescribable, lingering appeal, making his face radiant. Though, he’d probably look even better if he had a mole by one eye. I stood there blankly while he touched the robes in his hands as if holding a priceless treasure. Then he turned and left us.

Little Li stammered a parting line, “Lord...Lord Hua, take care.”

He waved his hand in admonition as he nodded, but didn’t turn back before disappearing into the trees. His figure wasn’t bad...

Though it felt like something wasn’t right. There was too much of a disparity to the person in my imagination. This guy was Lord Hua?

An oppressive pain appeared in my head, and an image flashed of a person dressed in white, lofty and unyielding as his robes billowed about. That forehead...ought to be filled with gloominess. In my impression, a man worthy of the 'Lord Hua' title was a person of 10,000 expressions, not...

"Master, what's wrong?"

I supported myself on Little Li's shoulder, a hand pressing against my forehead with eyes closed. I tried thinking back but couldn't remember a thing. Just now, that sudden feeling in my heart had been bitter and resigned, but the figure that had appeared in my mind had vanished without a trace.

I had a tangled look in my eyes as I gazed into the distance, asking in a low voice. "That person was really Lord Hua?"

"Yes."

"Tell me frankly," I looked doubtfully in the direction of the man who had already left. My hand had a death grip on Little Li's robes, and my voice wavered. "Aren't the residents of the Cold Palace under house arrest? How could he walk around like that?"

Little Li tilted his head. I had no idea what he was thinking about as he studied my face before speaking. "Lord Hua is different from other people."

Really...

Were those robes really his?

When he walked past me just then, I'd only smelled the faint scent of the palace incense, a far cry from the hints of medicine and bamboo that had lingered on the old robes in his hands... I withdrew my gaze and gave a sigh, touching where the robes had rested on Little Li's arms, stroking it as I asked again, "What kind of people live in the Cold Palace? Is it desolate and bleak?"

"Bleak? That's the most bustling place in the palace. Historically, disfavored concubines and male concubines all live inside."

Could you live so thoughtlessly? This...

Wait, that wasn't the point.

"Male concubines?" I paused to recover my breath, asking hesitantly, "You're saying they're men...these male concubines?"

He had a completely normal expression on his face. "That's right. The person just then was one of them."

Hold on...

I almost couldn't accept the idea. My body swayed, but fortunately he was there to support me.

"Master, what is the matter?"

"Support me, I want to go back and rest." I was out of breath.

The sunlight wavered on our way back, and my heart fluttered with it. I kept going and over over his words in my head. Unable to reconcile myself with the facts, I turned to ask him again. "This male concubine you mentioned, does he belong to the late emperor?"

"Which one?" he blinked, as if he didn't know who I meant. It took awhile before he spoke again with an obviously guilty conscience. "...Lord Hua? Oh, Master's asking about the one that walked away before."

I gave him a silent look, gaze complicated as I did my best to stem a raging tide.

"He's not," he replied quickly, "When the emperor was still a crown prince, he brought him in from the outside. This happened five years ago."

I sucked in a breath. Did he have something against me? He kept hiding things I wanted to hear and telling me things I didn't want to know. My chest felt oppressive, and a sad mournfulness seemed to be spreading within my heart. This wasn't to my taste at all.

It didn't seem right. Could it be that this body really did hold feelings for the current emperor, so my heart reacted when I realized he was raising male concubines...?

“Tell me more about that male concubine.”

“Rumors say he has brilliant medical skills. He was brought in to save the previous emperor, but got into awkward straits with his Majesty. Since then, he’s always lived in the Cold Palace. The emperor was loath to part with him, so he’d visit the Cold Palace every few days...later on...he forgot about him.”

My heart gave a violent throb. “Stop talking.” I covered my face and took an oppressive breath.

That’s it, then.

It’s fine if my heart was just pounding, but why was it twisted in pain? Like a knife had forcibly cut it open, aching beyond aching, making it impossible to control my grief.

I...

What was going on with me?

[1] at your Imperial Majesty’s command (遵旨) —zunzhi, what officials/laypersons/etc. say in response to an imperial edict, or commands by the emperor himself. Rather formal and important-sounding. >:)

[2] say a dead camel was a live horse (死骆驼都能被说成活马儿) —

siluotuo douneng shuocheng huomaer, basically he can make one thing sound like another.

[3] General Qi (戚将军) – Qi jiangjun, the surname here could mean “relative,” “sorrow/woe”, or “an axe-like weapon used in ancient China.”

[4] orchid hands (兰花指) —lanhuazhi, a common hand gesture found on ladies in traditional Chinese paintings or classical Chinese dance, in which the user extends the fingers of her hand like the petals of a flower. Suggests gracefulness and delicacy.

Chapter 45 (Part 1)

The pale stone floors scattered with yellow tiles and the red walls covered with colorful, luxurious paintings combined with the solemn dignity of the palace to stifle me. I suddenly realized that everything here was unfamiliar.

Little Li supported my preoccupied self back to the main hall. I could see the cold and cheerless door from a long distance away, with no imperial carriage in sight. Not only did I let out a breath in relief, but I also gave the eunuch a look as I murmured, "You used the emperor to scare me off. If I'd known it'd be like this, I would've followed that Lord Hua straight back to the Cold Palace for some novel sights."

This guy actually said that the emperor would get angry if he came back from official business to find me gone. The emperor had lots of work to do, there was no guarantee he'd come back here even when he finished.

Seriously...

I gave him a glance and poked him with my finger. Little Li smiled with me, and lowered his head to bow. I pulled up my robes and took one step into the doors before bumping into something warm. Yah...what was this? I felt around clumsily with my hands around his chest until he caught me.

Little Li had already been frightened to kneeling on the ground. "May the Emperor live 10,000 years, 10,000 of 10,000 years!"

Recently, all I've been doing is running into people I shouldn't...

—

I raised my head to meet the fearfully terrorizing eyes of the man before me, uncertain of how I was feeling. Disturbed, anxious...they all came naturally. I started as I remembered I should greet him, but I couldn't move when he was holding my hands.

"Where did you go?"

"My body felt sluggish after lying in bed all day, so I went to soak in some sunshine."

His eyes seemed to hold some thoughts as his eyebrows furrowed. A hand rested on my elbow and pushed me to a corner against the walls as he looked me up and down with concentration. Head lowered, he came to stroke my hair before his lips quirked up. "You went to look for him, didn't you..."

He seemed to be extremely angry, but was trying his best to hold it back, intentionally lowering his voice to a soft and gentle tone. I felt a bit uneasy and looked to the side, appealing to Little Li for help. Yet I discovered that the kneeling eunuch had long since disappeared.

"What are you thinking about instead of speaking?"

"I don't know what I should say," I replied honestly, looking at the emperor.

Who was the "him" he mentioned? There was plenty of idle gossip within the court, so I couldn't bring up false charges against a person.

He gave a ridiculing smile. I frowned, feeling his hot gaze was examining me very closely. He didn't say anything else, but his body relaxed a bit. Still, I felt that something was wrong...

My line of vision went past his shoulders to the room beyond...as it turned out, the room was filled with broken porcelain, as if it had just went through a "reign of terror[1]."

"What happened here?"

He was quiet for a long while before suddenly breaking into a smile.

"General Qi's people were remonstrating about the empress selection issue again. Zhen was irritated and came to find you, but you weren't here. After seeing how outdated and old the furnishings in your quarters were, I decided to break a few pieces."

Old...

Of course the older the item, the more valuable it was. There was an eighty percent chance that this guy was too well-off and just felt snubbed. I stared at him with a grin, but he lowered his head and pulled me into an embrace, murmuring by my ear. "If you saw him, then it's fine.

Break off your thoughts earlier. In the future, even if you spend one-tenths of your thoughts on me, I'll treat you well and take care of you for a lifetime."

He gave up using "Zhen" again. I felt a little frustrated with my chin forced against his shoulder, and used a hand to lightly comfort him. His feelings were getting a little out of hand. The old eunuch by the gates had a good grasp of the situation, and made a few gestures towards the outside of the courtyard. Immediately, swarms of servants arrived and quickly picked up all the fragments from the floor.

As it turned out...it had been quiet outside not because the emperor hadn't returned, but because he'd scared away the servants with his arrival. I sucked in a breath and blanked out for a while before touching him again. He didn't react, but continued to hold me.

A fragrant aroma began to fill the rooms. His embrace had an indescribable tenderness, and the mood felt just right, but...

"What was that noise?" he lowered his head and gave me a hesitant glance. Eyes widened as he rested a hand on my abdomen. Just in time, my stomach gave another growl.

"You're not young anymore, but why don't you understand how to take care of yourself better?" his eyes were filled with concern and distress. "Have you eaten yet? You must be hungry."

"Not too hungry." When I recalled the words he said during his emotional fit, I'd feel plenty full. Exactly what kind of things were hidden in this person's heart?

I sat down on the bed and kicked off my shoes, before realizing the emperor was here too... At the very least, I had an image to preserve, so I carefully arranged the shoes and sat ladylike on the bed. He gave a soft, but audible laugh. I didn't pay it the slightest mind, but pulled up my sleeves to take a translucent pastry. Sniffing it a few times, I took a bite. It was sweet...but not too greasy.

"I heard you went to the Cold Palace?"

Ghhgrnk.

I choked like a coward.

The news here travelled way too fast...did he go discuss official business, or tail me instead?

"Didn't manage to make it. I didn't know it was the Cold Palace, only thought that the spot behind the lotus pond had to be a good place. After listening to Little Li, I decided not to go."

He nodded, and suddenly said, "Don't believe the hearsay in the palace."

What rumors...? The ones about the emperor liking men? Though I didn't have the guts to ask him directly. I gave him a quiet glance...

He seemed to be deep in thought, eyes furrowed in vexation until he seemed to notice me. Indifferent, he didn't avoid my gaze but met it straight on. The light shone clearly on his features, which were extremely heroic and somewhat noble. It was a rather young face, but long infused with the spirit of a sovereign. Perhaps he seemed unapproachable to other people, but he was always temperate and calm with me.

Would this person...raise male concubines? It was hard to understand him.

He suddenly crept closer, a hand circling around my waist as he glanced at me before speaking softly. "After thinking to myself, I've concluded that some things between us have to be done. Thereafter, I won't worry even if you see other people, because it won't be worth any foolish fancies."

I was stunned.

Do what? What did he want to accomplish?

—

His hand touched my face as his gaze turned ambiguous before resting on my lips. Fingers slipped down and past my chin as he leaned over; perhaps the skin was too slippery, because he didn't get a grip. Seeing his face get closer and closer, I shrank back until I was against the wall, avoiding his hands. I gave a dubious look towards this opportunistic man. Who was it that said, 'being close to the emperor is like being close to a tiger?'

I thought this emperor had a fair disposition. At the very least, the space between his eyebrows were smooth, and he had a soft gaze. If there was something to help me overlook the feeling of goosebumps on my skin...then I'd feel a bit better.

"Look at how scared you are...Zhen isn't some sort of ferocious bird or wild beast," he said, stroking my face.

You're wilder than either of them. I gave a shiver, and meekly protested in silence.

"Forget it, I won't tease you." he smiled as he clapped his hands.

A group of court ladies slowly streamed in from outside, their steps exceptionally light. Every one of them was holding something in her hands, but they were too far away for me to see clearly.

"I can draw up the official documents tomorrow," he conveniently drew closer to speak, laughing. "The imperial palace rushed to make some clothing to wear for the grand ceremony. It was a little hasty, but you should try them on and see if they fit."

Ah...

A young eunuch wordlessly walked before me, kneeling while he slowly opened a wooden box. I quickly shielded my eyes with my hands... squinting as I peered over. I could only see a lifelike phoenix coronet[2], glistening and glittering yellow.

This was too much, right?

I took a deep breath.

Before I'd recovered, a circle of court ladies helped me off the bed and someone said in a low voice, "Master, please change clothes. This was carefully selected by his Majesty and only finished after multiple altercations."

I felt a little dazed.

Did the emperor need to personally concern himself with such things? He only smiled harmoniously, the lamplight making him eminently handsome and filling his face with warmth. I stood blankly for a second, glancing at the servants' deferential forms as they held various items above their heads.

A slim and graceful red robe was spread out before the bed. There was also a thicker outer robe made of some unknown material that made the embroidered gold dragons seem especially solemn. I could estimate that there were seven or eight layers of robes without even counting the beautiful collection of jade ornaments and gold hairpins.

The sight stupefied me.

These things were far from the rank of a paltry concubine, but nearly on par with the empress herself...the robes were quality robes and the gold was quality gold...so dazzling that my eyes were seeing afterimages. He

leaned against the bed, comfortably observing my expression with a hand propped beneath his head, playing with his ring. A gaze like that made my back turn numb.

Perhaps they'd caught the emperor's hint, but a few court ladies surrounded me and opened up my arms, preparing to take off my outer robes.

"There's no need to trouble you, I'll do it myself," I declined.

"How could we tire out the imperial concubine? Zhen should take charge of such a thankless job," a voice as warm and mellow as wine came from behind me, carrying it with the hints of a smile.

Not good.

Someone hooked around the edge of my collar and tugged. The sash that was wound tightly around my waist loosened as he took off a large portion of my outer robes. He drew closer and pulled me into his embrace, a finger resting on my remaining white inner robes as he smiled. "Usually, Zhen has others serving him. How about I serve you today and help you with your clothes?"

—

What kind of service was this? He'd mixed up the differences between "stripping" and "taking off" one's clothes.

"Your Majesty..."

"Un?"

I looked down at the finger currently digging its way into my inner robes.

"This doesn't need to be taken off if I'm trying on the outer robes."

"...true." he gave an embarrassed smile and withdrew his reckless wolf claws. I covered myself up with the inner robes. It was a little chilly with the wind blowing, though the scent of incense was strong as ever indoors. The court ladies looked like they wanted to laugh, but held it in as they surged over, taking off the rest of my outer robes. The bright red robes were spread out and brought over...catching the light, it seemed to reflect dark red threads within the cloth.

I was a bit out of it as the hustle and bustle continued. The only thing I noticed was his exceptionally delighted expression.

In that moment of inattention, a smooth but slightly chilly fabric passed over my fingers. When I came back to my senses, they'd already dressed me up. Surrounded by the bright red, my pale-skinned face seemed to reflect some of its jubilant cheer.

And then came another layer.

They turned me back and forth as they piled countless layers on me. These clothes looked fairly light, but their combined weight was enough to make it difficult to breathe and even move around in. Such a gorgeous

set of robes. Pretty as they were...was I really expected to wear them when my title was conferred on me?

My heart sank, and my scalp seemed to turn numb.

Standing before a bronze mirror, dressed resplendently with my hair hanging loosely about me, I looked nothing like the usual. Instead, there was a fatal attractiveness about the golden robes and scarlet red fabric lining my throat. The corners of my eyes rose slightly, and even my pupils seem to shine with a softer, more graceful light.

I supported myself against the table and took a deep breath.

With a wave of a hand, an eunuch followed me with head bowed, raising a trousseau filled with glittering head ornaments and hairpins.

"Master, your required accessories."

Tch, a joke...it's not like they were conferring the title on me today. I'm not going through with that kind of suffering. How many jin were those things?

Though they did look expensive and refined...

I circled around the box a few times, bending down to stare at that exquisite phoenix coronet. If I could, I'd pick it up and bite it with my teeth. It was probably pure gold. Turning towards the emperor, I spoke. "Your Majesty, does everyone have to wear these when they're conferred a title? It's so heavy."

I dragged my tediously long robes behind me as I approached him. Maybe I was tired, because I stepped on the hem of my clothes on the way and felt a little cold...

When I looked down, I realized someone had taken off my shoes without me noticing. In the chaos, I hadn't noticed a thing until now. I stepped onto a mat placed on the ground, feeling my cold toes grow a little numb.

"The rest of you are all dismissed." The emperor, who had been sitting with amusement on a soft cushion all this time, finally spoke. The retreating steps were so soft, there was barely any sound until the doors to the room shut, startling me.

The atmosphere immediately became extremely strange as the lights in the room dimmed. The golden lotus incense burners emanated thin trails of smoke that rose in the air, no longer buffeted by the breeze. Their ambiguous scent hovered in the air.

He slowly got off the bed and walked towards me, resting his hand on my shoulder. Before I could react, he'd lifted me up into his arms. Smiling, his gaze was firm as he took me to the bed and placed my stiff body there. I furrowed my eyebrows, but before I could curl up, his hand crept into my robes and found my feet, placing them on his legs. Those large, cocoon-like hands held my feet until they turned warm and numb to the point that my toes wanted to curl up.

He asked with a light smile, "Are you warm?"

Not just warm, but super comfortable. I was almost on the verge of crooning.

My entire body was warm, yet he didn't stop. Head lowered, he took the time to play around with my toes. It was very strange...even doing things such as this, he didn't lose a bit of a monarch's natural poise or bearing. A sentence suddenly appeared in my mind: if the first place a man touches is your feet and he treats it like a treasured jewel, then he'll truly love you.

Or in other words...he'd be a considerate husband.

But I couldn't remember where I'd heard these words from, no matter how I tried.

My hair...and my ears both itched. I recovered my senses as my lips grew warm from his kiss. A figure pressed down against me, pressing me to the bed. Though the light was behind him, I could still make out his gentle face. I was a little dazed as I sputtered.

"Y-y-you...what are you doing!?"

[1] reign of terror (腥风血雨) —xingfeng xueyu, literally "foul wind and a rain of blood." [2] phoenix coronet (凤冠) —fengguan, crown worn by an empress or imperial concubine, also used formerly as a bride's headdress. Very heavy!

Chapter 45 (Part 2)

The corners of his lips twitched up into something like a smile. "You're already Zhen's woman, what else could Zhen do?"

Ah...

Ahhhh, but didn't I lose my memories?

He lowered the bed curtains around us.

I couldn't resign myself to sitting on the bed, but reached out to jerk the bed curtains aside, only to hear him say, "It's chaotic in the outside world, so Zhen will protect you."

Before I could recovered from my surprise, he had already caught my hand. His other hand brushed open my outer robes to dig inside until they felt my shoulder bones, bringing with it a surprising chill. His large hands were like cocoons, and wherever he touched, my skin seem to turn numb and heated...

"Zhen knows why he doesn't like this outfit," he bent over, his heavy voice mixing with his breaths by my side. His lips parted to close around my ears as he hummed, and my mind seemed to burst. Soft and warm, the tactile impressions left by his sucking felt like tiny ants itching across my skin.

"It's too much trouble to take off, which Zhen doesn't like."

This was brazenly taking liberties. I felt unusually indignant and terribly shy, but there was no place to hide. I could only say without any hint of force, "Let go already."

The effect was just a little shy of an ant snorting.

"Zhen won't let go. You should know..." A faint hint of a smile could be found in his words as he regarded me warmly, long fingers brushing against my cheeks. "My thoughts of you grow deeper day after day."

I was a little dumbfounded. He smiled and held me tighter.

The bed curtains were all down and the light was hazy. It was a little hard to breathe with him crushing me. I could faintly hear the sound of his pendants moving, as if he were taking off his robes. My mind was in a heavy daze when I raised my head to grab the curtains...at least to get a breath of fresh air.

He bent over and tightly gripped my wrist, not letting me go. His expression was filled with the energy of an easy victory, the aura every inch an emperor...but to use it here... This person, how could he do such a thing?

He raised so many male concubines in the palace without accepting a single female. He should like men, so he shouldn't be able to act like this with me. But the truth was far from reality.

"What are you thinking about...why don't you speak?" his hands dug in

my robes and held me, fingers lightly rubbing against my skin. "...is it ticklish? Don't hide yourself away..."

Tears, why was he so interested in women? Can anyone tell me the reason? I took a breath and covered myself, turning my head away while I shot him a hazy look. I felt exceedingly puzzled and wronged.

"Y...y-you...this is..."

His face was half wreathed in light, half in shadow, making his features hard to discern. I could only see the area from his nose to his chin, clean, and resolute like a proper man, making it hard for people to look away. His hand was pressed on my shoulders.

"Right now, your heart has no one else in it but me." When he spoke to himself, I could tell...that something was putting him ill at ease.

He slowly lowered his body, the remaining materials of his clothing itching my skin. Against my exposed back, he left a trail of increasing frenetic kisses that were somehow filled with sorrow. When he released my hand, I took the chance to grab the bed curtains.

The dim lighting seemed to daze and confuse a person.

His messy hair draped down as he reached out to hold me, the light casting his shadow in sharp relief against the curtains. An arm wrapped around my belly and waist as he slowly tightened his grip to embrace me. In the dark, I could feel his finger brushing across my forehead and face...the movements soft and gentle, but without any warmth.

He said, 'Shao'er, you're still as beautiful as before...no, even more beautiful.'

He said, 'You're Zhen's woman.'

His words left me at a loss...and I forgot to resist, as if everything happening was a natural course of events. Those familiar, warm lips pressed against mine. He had the kind of sweeping forehead to drive a person to depravity, and the singular scent of a man as he embraced me intimately, and yet at this moment...

He lowered his head and spoke in a low voice, "What are you secretly giggling about?"

"Don't you like men?"

Abruptly, he raised his head, eyes widening minutely as they stared at me with a handsome yet gentle gaze. From that...I realized I was wrong. It was too late to crawl away now, tears...

Chaos fell upon the darkness.

—

When I came to my senses, I was directly in contact with his slender yet sturdy bare waist. He held onto my head, staring at me like he was going to ravage me that innate air of sovereignty now almost so potent that it

threatened to suffocate me. My body softened like a puddle of water, but I still tried to crawl and resist.

He bent my knee and held onto my thigh, gentle caressing it to turn them soft and powerless. Then, he grabbed my shoulders and shifted my body over. With a hand on my head he looked at me, getting an eyeful.

Longing shone from his eyes.

"Shao'er..." he called out gently with warm breaths against my ear, thin lips touching my breasts, a little scalding. It was as if he wanted to suck me into his body.

Suddenly, I couldn't hold back a moan. He bent forward to embrace me tightly in his arms, and that hot metal rod squeezed into that soft and tender point between my thighs. I could sense a searing heat that made me feel especially helpless. His head moved closer and gently sniffed my neck. He seemed to be saying something, but I couldn't hear it clearly.

He moved his waist forward a little more, and I felt as though my body was being pulled apart. This feeling of slowly being filled could even be called...too painful. Having difficulty enduring, I tightly gripped onto the bedsheets.

Fortunately, he quickly dodged before I bit him.

He looked to be enduring patiently and there was a layer of sweat on

his resolute face, yet he didn't forget to stroke my hair with his hand and wipe away my sweat. Right as I relaxed, he held onto my body from both sides and fiercely thrust into me without any hesitation. My twisted face could be described as pained.

Hesitating, he gazed at me in astonishment before the look in his eyes became joy, then amazement.

Was anything wrong? Yet I was so dazed I couldn't figure out what it could be. I wasn't used to the sudden, severe pain that had suddenly appeared. He held me tightly and spoke in a cold voice without warmth, "I won't lose you again..."

Although the tone was flat, I knew...his heart was flustered and trembling. My blankness deepened as my mind grew empty. Within the dim bed curtains, all I remembered was his nimble fingers. I'd neglected any other matters of importance.

His body rocked slightly as he inched forwards, as if wanting to bury himself in my deepest parts...until we became one. My body followed that rough, coarse sensation until his movements swept me away wave after wave, releasing intoxicating, surging torrents.

The colorful flowers on the bed curtains seemed to deepen...

My eyes opened wide, and I felt a little lost. He was slow and steady one moment, fierce, and furious the next. The torment he caused me made it hard to breathe. His own breaths made me feel dizzy. My train of thoughts grew more and more distant until they blurred. I could only recall the last thing he said...

Now, there won't be anyone to fight with me. You belong to me, and me alone.

With this, the things that were supposed to happen had occurred. The ambiguous odors of the aftermath lingered within the bed curtains long after it was over. I opened my eyes and looked up towards the hazy yellow curtains. The light that shone through blended together the flowers on the fabric, while the air was still filled with that ambiguous scent.

I shifted a bit, but his hand on my waist prevented me from getting up. Instead, he turned over and held me in place with his body, childishly burying his face between my shoulder blades. I gave him a lazy glance. He tilted his head to look at my body, not a hint of drowsiness in his eyes.

I couldn't bear it anymore and tugged on the bedcovers, turning over my body to look at him. "Didn't you say...that I was your woman for a long while now...?"

So, then why was there blood on the sheets? My fingers found the spot and brushed over it.

He kept me company with his smile and scooped me into an embrace, a bright voice speaking clearly into my ear. He sounded like he was in excellent spirits. "How did I know that you were only playing house with your little friends?"

The gladness in his voice was all too evident, and his smile was boundlessly gentle and soft. His gaze on me only increased in feelings and affection. But...why didn't I understand?

What 'little friends?'

"It's getting late, don't go off into flights of fancy. Sleep." He helped to tuck me in.

How could I sleep?

As the saying goes, a monarch makes no joking remarks. But I had no way to understand most of what he said, nor could I tell the truth from the lies, even if I guessed. I turned my head to look at him, that eminently handsome face illuminated by the dim, hazy light. Despite everything... maybe he truly loved me. He always treated me well, and his movements and expressions shouldn't be fake. But still, what was the story behind the male concubine in the Cold Palace...?

He grasped the hand I'd rested on his forehead, speaking lightly. "Actually, I should have told you earlier. After the previous emperor died, General Qi assumed control of the military powers and gained great influence in the court. But he was still unsatisfied and tried every way possible to send woman into the imperial harem. If his daughter can become the empress, then he'll feel like he has nothing to fear before Zhen.

...these years, Zhen's beat him at his own game by liking men and raising male concubines, but I didn't expect that old thing to..."

These were all affairs of the court, so why was he telling me?

He stopped, gentle eyes trailing down to see my damp hair with a small smile. He drew my chin closer with a shady look and dropped me a kiss. "Now, that he knows of your existence, I doubt he'll leave the matter at that... Stay carefully by my side and don't go anywhere, all right...?"

By now, I was getting quite sleepy and lifted my eyes with effort. He smiled lightly and held me tight, before attacking my drowsy self. But truthfully speaking, it really was nice and warm when he held me...

Even though everything was soft and sweet, why...did I still feel this was all very bizarre...?

Chapter 46

Someone was drawing up the bed curtains. I opened my eyes, dazzled by the flickering candle flames. Little Li wore a cautious expression as he spoke in a low voice. "Master, it's time to eat your meal."

I lazily lifted my eyelids. The other half of the bed was already empty. "Where did his Majesty go?"

"He went to review memorials to the throne and told your servant to make sure you ate on time so you wouldn't go hungry."

"There's no rush. Get some water, I want to wash up." I draped myself in an outer robe, declining his offered hand to sit by the edge of the bed, frowning a bit as I adjusted to the soreness in my waist.

"Yes," he answered, backing away a few steps to open a door and wave furiously outside.

It seemed like someone had been in wait long beforehand because a short while later, 18 eunuchs carried in tubs of hot water as they walked in. Court ladies also came in with clean sets of clothes to place behind the folding screens. When I wanted to get up, Little Li hastily came over to support me by the arm...

I glanced at him as I realized why he was so fixated on helping me. It felt like my bones were about to fall apart. My legs were like soft silken floss with no energy in them at all. I rested a hand on my sore waist as I

took tiny steps towards the screen. A peek inside revealed that the pool was already hot with rising steam.

“That’s all, you’re all dismissed.” I gave a casual wave and shut out all the servants. Everything was nice in the imperial palace. It was a good place to enjoy a happy life of ease and comfort. If you wanted, you didn’t even need to expend effort to hold chopsticks during your meals. There would naturally be people that held tasty things to your mouth to eat.

Though a lazy person like me was happy with others dressing and feeding me, having them bathe me was something I was still unused to...

You could soak in a bath and wash yourself.

If there were multiple people standing behind you, waiting to strip you naked from your immaculate clothes before enthusiastically watching as you soaked in a tub...

That was definitely hardship.

I rested against the pool’s edge as the hot water soothed my tired body. A small, handleless cup of clear wine rested within arm’s reach. Its surface was as smooth as jade, and a lifelike, agile white dragon was carved against its side, cool to the touch.

This must belong to the emperor. Presumably, he liked to drink a bit while he bathed.

The servants hadn’t feared reprimanding when they carried over the

custom to me. Right now, I was considered a figure who could dine and sleep with the Son of Heaven. In their eyes, I was probably suffused in imperial favor.

I laughed in spite of myself as I splashed water on my face.

Though I was immersed in the pool, my entire body still felt as sore as if a cart had ran over it. I gave a slight frown and groaned. The lights were always lit early in the palace, and the sun was just starting to set outside. Fiery red light shone against the paper windows. A hazy light appeared in the rooms to ignite a row of lamps, which shone against the folding screen and stirred its landscapes of mountains and water to life... gradually, the emperor's face appeared in my mind.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, submerging myself below the surface. In the warm water, my body felt slightly more comfortable. I thought of the emperor's lack of concubines in the past five years and the rumors of the male concubine in the Cold Palace, feeling that things were a bit strange.

The emperor seemed to be hiding something from me.

Forget it, I won't dwell on it.

—

Leaning against the edge of the pool, I brushed aside my hair as I poured another cup from a flagon of wine. Looking at the fine stream of fragrant, sparkling clear liquid made me a little drunk before I'd even

taken a sip. A marvelously intriguing scent tunneled its way past my nostrils, persistent and intense, but nothing like wine at all.

Something felt a little off.

I suddenly straightened up, splashing water everywhere. A small voice sounded from outside the door. "Is Master finished with washing? May your servant go and prepare dinner?"

This Little Li, he couldn't have been bowing outdoors and listening for my movements the whole time, right?

My face fell and I replied unhappily, "How could I finish so quickly? Wait an hour more before calling for the food."

The person outside thought for a while before speaking. "Master, do you need your servant to tell the court ladies to bring in more hot water?"

I clicked my tongue. He'd gotten more persistent since I had ignored him for so long. I prepared to pretend I was angry, before pausing. There was still that wonderful scent that made my tongue feel sweet. I was still unsteady on my legs, but I propped myself against the pool to hold myself up.

There was a small commotion outside. I heard Little Li gave a strange, stifled cry before his shadow against the windows tilted to one side, as if he'd toppled to the ground...

The fragrant scent grew stronger...

A figure flashed past the windows outside.

Surprised, I gingerly crawled my way out, grabbing something to dry myself off before pulling down the thin robes resting on the folding screen. Thinking a bit, I grabbed another layer and draped it over my shoulders, afraid that the wind tonight would be too strong for my body. Ducking down to hide, I raised my head and gave a sudden gasp.

From a chink in the door, I could see a thin, misty smoke floating inside the room. My eyes widened as I used my robes to block my nose. Suddenly, a cry rang out outdoors.

"Who's that sneaking around!"

"Capture the assassin..."

The shadows of people fighting reflected against the windows, and the sounds of conflict and clashing went on unceasingly. The doors shuddered from the impact as I remained stunned.

I didn't even have time to fix my hair as I snuck to the back door. Suddenly, an arrow whizzed by, narrowly missing my ear to bury itself in the wall by my side, tail feathers quivering. I almost jumped in fright, hastily pulling open the door to let myself out.

All right, this definitely counted as alarmingly dangerous.

Assassins could even penetrate the heavily guarded premises of the main hall...weirdly enough, the servants hadn't even sensed that something had gone wrong. A cool wind brushed past, making me squint my eyes and sway on my feet. My half-wet hair made my scalp turn numb. From a distance, I could see the chaos happening about the main hall. There were numerous guards running about. I wasn't sure what to do at the moment as I hid my hands in my sleeves to walk off, head lowered.

My steps came to a sudden halt as I knitted my eyebrows to sniff my robes. It was still full of that strange scent. Was it meant to drug a person?

But why were there no effects when I breathed it in? Instead, I felt... more and more clearheaded. My suspicions began to grow. This scent...I lowered my head to sniff it again. Just when I was working things out, the sound of coughing startled me. A few young eunuchs passed by my side, hurrying along with heads bowed though they couldn't resist casting curious looks my way. I followed their gazes to look at myself, the wind billowing through my robes.

The sight was a little depressing.

I'd never expect I would narrowly escape an assassin by climbing out of a bath. Of course my clothes were disordered, what was there to look at? Most likely, no one could tell I was the emperor's imperial concubine now.

I gave them a fierce look before adjusting the sash at my waist and

straightening out my clothes. After calming myself down, my thoughts drew back to survey my surroundings. Where exactly had I ended up at?

There was no one else around, only that pond teeming with red lotuses. The wind had blown off most of their petals, which looked like seeping blood against the light of the setting sun. There was a narrow path that led to who-knows-where, looking exceptionally quiet and secluded. A face suddenly appeared in my mind, with ordinary features yet a delicate air. My heart chilled as I unconsciously clutched my robes.

The Cold Palace was directly ahead of me. Since I'd walked this far, I might as well go and take a look.

Fortunately, all the guards had rushed to the main hall to catch the assassin, so there were less on watch here. Looking around, the place seemed a bit desolate. The little path I followed was covered in withered yellow leaves. It felt a little unreal as I stepped across them with my feet, leaves crinkling. In the distance, I could hear the sound of children's voices as they played.

Surprised, I walked forwards, brushing aside the tree branches in my way.

Oh, there really were two children outside the residence, squatting in the dirt to play with something. Their faces were very pretty, and they looked a bit like each other. Both were dressed in brightly colored, fine-quality silks, the quality far too good for any children of the Cold Palace. Their hands were filthy, and the edges of their robes were covered in dust.

The person looking after them was obviously surprised, but took no action to obstruct me. Neither of the children were afraid of strangers. They gave me a glance and went back to playing. It seemed they were making little figures out of mud.

Strange...

Why were these two children playing in front of the Cold Palace?

I watched them as I walked along, having no desire to disturb such a quiet, happy picture. Circling past them, I stood before the tightly shut gates, looking up before placing my hand on the doors badly in need of repair. There was a moment of indecision as my heart quivered and grew uneasy...

The door was a little damp, and its red lacquer paint had begun to fade. Its tactile sensation was startlingly real against my skin. With a light push, the slightly rotten gates opened. A gust of wind blew out, spraying my face with sand. I rubbed my eyes with my sleeves as they teared up and made it hard to see.

—

The inside of the Cold Palace was deserted and desolate, many of the rooms sealed. All the other halls in the palace had long lit their lamps but there was only darkness here, with no sign of life...

It had a nice name, this Cold Palace...but really, it was just a broken-down house.

"Is there anyone here?" I called from the door.

Nobody answered.

Unable to wait any longer, I lifted my robes and boldly stepped inside. The courtyard only had one stone table without any chairs. The space inside was small and unadorned, but well-kept, unlike the leaf-strewn path outside. The flagstones on the ground were old and neither had much moss on them, nor were they too damp.

Just that...with things so dim, I was starting to miss the lantern that Little Li always carried with him. Though it was only lit with a candle of red wax and looked like a ghost light wavering in the night, it could still banish a section of darkness and help me see the dim shapes in the distance more clearly.

Speaking of which, why weren't there any lights here? Even if the Cold Palace wasn't paid much silver, they'd still get candles.

Weird, didn't anyone live here?

Just as I thought this, I caught sight of a human-shaped figure flashing by out of the corners of my eyes. When I turned around to look, it was gone. Alarmed, I broke out into a cold sweat. Standing in place, I shrank my head back and dug into my sleeves, hesitating for a long while before looking outside the gates. The children who were playing there had disappeared, as if the voices I'd heard before were all an illusion.

Then...could they be ghosts?

I could only feel the scalp on my head turning numb as my icy hands while cold sweat broke out over my body. Little Li said a male concubine lived in the Cold Palace, but why did I feel that this place lacked signs of life? There was something indescribably strange about it all...

While I was considering when to leave, I heard a vague noise. My body stiffened as I held my breath to listen. There was no mistake...the sound came from the room furthest away from me, where the door was unlocked. This is the Cold Palace, where Lord Hua was supposed to live.

I didn't know why, but from the first time I heard his name to all the times afterward, when people mentioned details about him, my heart would tighten to a taut string, as if about to snap. Disturbed, restless—I'd never been troubled like this before.

Did his relationship with the emperor cause me to feel this way?

Was it just because of the emperor, though?

I really couldn't tell. Perhaps, I'd need to ask him for the details before I could reach a conclusion. I held back for a bit before the curiosity was too strong to resist. More soft noises came from the room, making my heart itch.

Damn it! If I was going to die, I might as well die from fright, not by being stifled! At least I would pass away understanding everything.

I hunched down as I approached that door, preparing to spy through the crack in the doors. A cold wind blew out, turning my scalp numb...I squinted before I could see anything. It was very dim inside the room, but there really was someone inside, fair and graceful...actually, I could even call them lithe and elegant.

What was that sticking out of their head? It looked like a flower hairpin.

A female?

A female was in this room?

Wasn't it a male concubine that lived here?!

—

I was angry. Why was I angry? I didn't know either, but I pushed open the door, frightening the person inside. The faint scent of mold came to greet me, and the ancient floorboards groaned beneath my feet. Surprised, I began to grow apprehensive.

...this, did it count as invading personal quarters?

In the dim lightning, everything was absolute silent. I could see a shadowy form back away a few steps, her back to me as she dug in her sleeves for a long while, as if searching for something...there was a sharp scraping noise, and light illuminated the room.

Under the hazy light, I stood dumbfounded. She leaned over to pick up the lamp and peered at me. Its dim yellow glow lit up the entire room as well as my features. I was a little timid, uncertain of whether I should hide my face. I tried to turn my head away as much as possible, taking the chance to inspect the room. The objects were set up orderly as if purposely arranged, but there was no sign that anyone lived here. Everything was covered in a thin layer of dust. The weather had turned colder, but the covers on the bed were thin and poor, and carried the odor of damp.

"Are you the imperial concubine that Big Brother Emperor's going to confer a title on?" a timid female voice asked.

I roused myself, unable to resist looking up at the rafters. There were quite a few remnants of white knotted silks there.

She asked me again.

I gave an 'un' in affirmation before withdrawing my gaze to her face.

Maybe the lamplight was to blame, but there wasn't a single hint of blood in her youthful face. Her complexion was extremely pale, but she had beautiful eyebrows that had rose slightly. If she knitted those brows, she would probably look fierce, but an attractive girl like her seemed so vulnerable and weak. She was dressed ornately, and though the hairpin in her head was nothing compared to my phoenix coronet, it was still noble and precious.

She smiled a bit and said lightly, "Perhaps you don't recognize me." A hand rose to rest on her temples, the wrist as white as jade. "My name is

Xuan'er. I'm Big Brother Emperor's little sister."

Little sister?

I'd never heard him mention it...

What was she doing at the Cold Palace?

I glanced outside. Out of all the rooms in the Cold Palace, only this one was lit and had the signs of human habitation. Everywhere else was pitch-black. Odd, it really was grotesquely odd.

Eh...?

"Where's the man who lives in the Cold Palace? Why isn't there any sign of him?" I asked rashly.

She seemed flabbergasted as she looked at me, eyes gleaming like a trough full of water as she pondered for a bit. "Are you talking about the Lord Hua who used to live here?"

Ah...

Used to live?

"Where did he move to?"

She smiled softly. "If you're talking about Lord Fang Hua, then he lived here for awhile five years ago. Afterwards, he took his leave and left the imperial palace."

What?! Left the palace...? But what about the one I met recently?

"Last time the laundry rooms mixed up his robes and he came to personally retrieve them. How could he have left for five years already?" I was doubtful.

"How could that fake compare to one-tenth of Fang Hua's looks?" she lowered her head, using a sleeve to brush away the dirt on the table. Her words were slow and drawn out. "You should know, all the male concubines that Big Brother Emperor takes in are named Lord Hua."

I was stunned.

There was no way to avoid it, this revelation was too earth-shaking. A strange feeling rose in my heart...something I couldn't describe clearly... at the very least, it was very tangled.

She looked at me once more, mouth stuck between a smile and a line as she spoke. "Fang Hua is unique and resembles a jade Immortal. No matter how many others try to imitate that air, they still fall short of him. But nobody foresaw that he'd get sick not long after living in the Cold Palace.

Few people paid him any attention, so it was only me who always gave him flowers to eat. Ever since Big Brother Emperor banished him to the

Cold Palace, I'd liked coming over to visit...

He's a very good-natured, gentle person, even if he never talked much. After his illness, he spoke less and less. That's right...sometimes when he was feeling better, Lord Fang Hua would call me Little Huang[1]."

She lowered her head and fiddled with her hands, face holding a quiet happiness like a woman recalling the joys of her youth.

Wait...she said the man was named Fang Hua.

My head turned numb.

This name was very familiar.

"What's wrong?" she looked at me, deeply concerned. I smiled with difficulty, my head heavy and dizzy. Every single one of her words rang with truth in my ears.

"There was a period of time when I asked Big Brother Emperor to let me move in with Lord Hua, but he refused. Afterwards, Lord Hua disappeared from the palace." her smile turned sad, and I had the sudden feeling she shouldn't be smiling like that. It seemed inconsistent with her image. Instead, she should...

She should what?

I was blank until an image appeared in my mind of a self-important

brat, whose face was enough to make a person gnash their teeth. In the end, I wanted to say something else, but something threw himself against her and hugged her by the legs.

“E niang[2], I’m hungry.” It was a very young voice.

There was a figure outside holding onto a second little child, whose beautiful eyes looked my way with a smile.

“It’s getting late, I should leave.” the pretty woman gave me a smile, and walked out the gates holding the little child by the hand. She’d left the candle for me, using the moonlight to guide her way...

I suddenly noticed that her robes, despite being of gorgeous make, looked a bit shabby beneath the moonlight, though it should’ve been barely used.

Even the emperor’s little sister lived such a hard life?

—

I exhaled, holding the candle in its lamp as I inspected this so-called Cold Palace. This was probably the place where her Fang Hua had lived. Besides a single bed, the room contained a table and two or three chairs. Although they were simple and unadorned, they made me feel at ease.

A jar on the table caught my attention. Testing its weight in my hand, I found it very light. A glance inside revealed some traces left behind by tea as well as a lingering scent of fresh flowers. Its owner must have been

exceedingly elegant and refined.

Just as I was spacing out, a tiny noise sounded from outside the window.

[1] Little Huang (小黄) —xiaohuang, also known as Xuan'er (璇儿), made her first appearance in Chapter 30: A Clingy Servant, and was also mentioned indirectly as an aside in chapter 34. [2] e niang (额娘) —a formal, fancy way of saying mother, mom, *etc.*

Chapter 47 (Part 1)

I raised my voice and called out, "Who's outside?"

A lamp could be seen shining through the windows as someone coughed outside. Surprised, my eyes rose. I waited expectantly and a person dressed in eunuch's robes walked inside, carrying a lamp. The light flickered against his face and made his expression somewhat unreal.

It was Little Li.

Curling my lips in disappointment, I turned to sit on the bed, ignoring its layer of dust. "What are you doing here?"

"So it turns out Master was here, your servant has been looking for you. Just then, I fainted away at the main hall before realizing an assassin was on the prowl...all the servants have been on the search. Luckily, a few eunuchs said they saw you walk this way. You must be hungry by now. Dinner's ready so please follow me back, Master."

I made a small noise but refused to speak. He stood still, silent as well.

After some time, I spoke again, though my voice was a little hoarse. "This...when did that Lord Hua move out of the palace? Don't lie to me anymore, I'm talking about Fang Hua."

He remained calm, though his hands involuntarily tightened. The fingers looked pale white beneath the lamplight, clearly betraying his

anxiety. Surprised, I watched the lamp reflect off his face, which pulled itself into a reluctant smile. "Not long after the previous emperor passed again, or about half a month after Lord Fang was chased to the Cold Palace, he left this place. At that time, the current emperor had yet to take the throne."

"Why didn't I hear anyone mention this? The emperor didn't say bring it up either," I muttered to myself, eyebrows furrowed. He raised his head to look at me with trembling lips, a complicated expression on his face.

What was wrong?

"Are you hiding something from me?" my face stiffened.

He bowed forwards, head lowered as his hands grasped his robes. Finally, he couldn't hold himself back and said in a low, extremely stealthy voice, "This isn't something a servant like me should gossip about behind someone's back. But it's really uncomfortable to keep covering it up. Actually..." He frowned slightly, lifting his eyes to me. "In truth, not long after Master left the Cold Palace, Lord Hua began to pack his things and prepare to leave."

What?! What did this have to do with me?

Wait...hold on...I seemed to have seized on something. My mind searched vainly in a blank space for something I couldn't quite grasp. "You mean to say," I clutched his hand, frowning as I spoke carefully. "I lived in the Cold Palace before?"

He pushed aside my hand in embarrassment, backing away a step.
"Exactly so, right here."

Was I a disfavored concubine as well?

He nodded and added another line, "At that time, Master and I both served Lord Hua."

Ah, what balderdash...

It felt like a string had snapped inside my body, sending me all asunder. My mood sank with my drooping shoulders. Why didn't I remember anything of this? I bent my head in a moment of silence. No, this was wrong...if I couldn't remember anything, why would I remember this?

Little Li kept his head bowed but stole a glance at me. I held myself in check, calming my heart as I sat straighter and coughed. "Tell me about the details. If you make up any nonsense, I won't forgive you."

"Yes." Even with his body bent, his words were very clear. "Your servant has always been with Lord Hua. Later on, Master was summoned from the Imperial Physicians' courtyard to serve Lord Hua. Back then, you had a round face with small eyes, and weren't very tall. You didn't look like much either..."

"Stopstopstop, we won't continue with that. Speak."

He bowed again, eyes lowered as he continued. "But who knew that one night, his Majesty...no, he was still the crown prince then. His

imperial highness, the crown prince and Lord Hua were enjoying drinking together. Later on, you got into an argument with the crown prince and started arguing in the courtyard. Then...the crown prince teared..."

He really matched his narrative, mimicking the crown prince's actions by waving aside his sleeves...I ducked my head to the side to avoid the sweep. The candlelight on the table flickered incessantly beneath the wind of his sleeves.

I glared at him.

He hastily lowered his head, standing primly in place as he spoke docilely, "After the crown prince did that, your face mask fell, and then you ran away."

Ah...

He sure liked dwelling on trivial details. Why did I smell the hint of adultery in this story? Was this a complicated love triangle with me as the third wheel who ruined their relationship? I dawdled a bit before looking back, just in time to catch Little Li looking at me for any reaction. In response, I gave him a light kick and said icily, "I told you to tell me why Lord Hua left. Why did you bring the topic back to me again...keep going, don't stop! If you spout any more drivel I'll tear apart your lips."

The lonely moon shed its light on him. This guy actually gave a mischievous laugh and shook his head. "The night after you left, the crown prince and Lord Hua shut themselves in a room. I don't know what they talked about. The result...was that Lord Hua grew ill. The crown prince came to visit every day, but was always refused at the door by

Lord Hua. A bit later, Lord Hua left behind a note and departed."

So afterwards, the emperor refused to take any concubines for five years. The story of Lord Hua leaving the palace was rarely mentioned as well. Thinking back...the words that the emperor had told me, as well as his expression, was like remembering old time's sake for him.

Is it possible that I was the one who stuck herself in and ruined a happy family? The idea was shocking. I took a ferocious breath of cold air to recover.

"Master, what's wrong?" Little Li quickly came to support my arm.

"Nothing serious," I turned away, speaking quietly. "The things you've told me tonight, don't tell anyone else. Don't even mention it to the emperor." I couldn't let him remember his old flame or these past events...

"Your servant understands," Little Li seemed to relax from his tension. "Lord Hua has always been a good person. Your servant can tell he always treated you very well, so it's no wonder you're asking about him. And so... I didn't control my words." His eyes looked at mine. "A good person like that...you shouldn't forget him."

My heart suddenly shrank back and started to beat wildly.

—

What had happened to me? How could one little line send my heart pounding?

Was a guilty conscience haunting me? I had been a disdainful, vile character, yet forgotten everything. Then I'd greedily accepted all the pleasures of my present life...

How criminal, how evil.

Little Li seemed to be sizing me up as I stared at him head-on and spoke frankly. "All the things you've said, I can't really remember them anymore. But since he's treated me so well, I'll definitely burn a stick of incense for him to Buddha before I eat and sleep, and pray for his blessings."

Little Li gave me a significant look.

I didn't have time to ponder it deeply, but propped myself up. My stomach began to grumble, and I gave it a glance, rubbing it with my hands. Little Li had excellent foresight as he said, "Master, it's getting late. Shall we go back? It's already past dinnertime, if we drag it out any longer it'll be midnight snacktime instead."

"All right, let's go."

He actually reached out a hand to bar my way. "You're going to be conferred a title soon. Many eyes will be on you...it's not good for you to leave the Cold Palace so directly, I'll call over a sedan chair for you."

But...

Didn't I walk over here? It was so dark at night, who could see the path clearly? His face remained adamant.

"Forget it, forget it. Hurry and go, I'll wait."

"Yes!" he knelt on the ground. I waved a hand as if chasing away a fly. He trailed a wisp of smoke behind him as he ran off with the lantern. The room immediately dimmed, and shadows fell across the walls oppressively. I felt a bit bored and glanced at the lamp on the table...huh, the candle was almost finished, the melted wax like red years.

If I'd realized it earlier, I should have kept Little Li's lantern instead.

I looked about me until I found a stick of bamboo to suppress the candle flame slightly so the light would last until Little Li returned. But the weak flame trembled before the night wind on the verge of being extinguished.

I raised my sleeves to shut the tattered window that had blown open and couldn't resist turning to smile towards the candlestick holder. "Esteemed little ancestor, you better not go out." With the chill wind blowing through the Cold Palace like this, I'd really feel frightened if there wasn't any light...so the candle definitely couldn't go out. Definitely not. I muttered the words to myself until I was on the verge of praying to the Bodhisattva.

It seemed to fit the mood.

Suddenly, there was a soft pah, and the candle died out.

I stood stunned.

Abruptly, everything sank into darkness except for the moonlight from the window. Faintly, I could hear the sound of footsteps behind me. It turned my scalp numb, and I blurted out, "Little Li, is that you?" That person didn't reply. My brows furrowed, and I tightened my grip against the window frame, preparing to turn around. "Only you would be so unruly. Don't scare me..."

Before I could finish, a sharp pain hit my back from a tiny rock, sealing my internal passageways. Immediately, a pair of hands rested on my shoulders. My heart sank and before I could scream, someone muffled me with their hands...a strong but unfamiliar person.

Curses, who was this?

My body was held in place as a burlap sack covered me...in the darkness, I could only feel my body being lifted up, as if carried on someone's shoulders. So uncomfortable, I couldn't even breathe...only panic.

Who was this?

Who was kidnapping me? I tried to protest, but only made muffled noises. The effects weren't very clear...at the very least, no one paid me any attention. He walked quickly but with light steps, his sturdy body strengthened from martial arts practice. I don't know which path he picked, but we didn't meet any guards the entire time.

I hadn't made any enemies since entering the court, but why were assassins capturing me? Aiya, my poor, bullied waist...wait, could this be one of General Qi's men? That's not right, his men would kill me directly, not carry me around like this. Was it an enemy from outside the court... but I couldn't remember a thing...

I wanted to cry, but I had no tears to shed.

My body was thrown aside somewhere—but lightly, so there wasn't any pain. Hearing the sound of hoofbeats, I guessed we'd left the palace gates. Then came a bumpy ride that jolted my insides into queasy colors...that person rested a hand on my body, as if afraid I'd be thrown off. I gasped for breath from inside the burlap bag, but a strange smell penetrated my nostrils, making me frown as I sniffed it...

Curses, this was a top-notch, unparalleled type of knockout incense!

You're really ruthless...

It had five times as much potency as the incense at the bathing pool. Curses! This guy must have spent a lot of money, these things cost tons of silver. As a result, my head lolled to one side and I dutifully fainted away.

Actually, my dear kidnapper might not have realized that these things were only half as effective on my body. Though I couldn't open my eyes and had no energy, my mind was very clear. I could feel the pain in my body caused by the jolting ride and hear the hoofbeats of the galloping horse.

Ours was a very long journey. I didn't know where he was taking me. Though I had a sudden attack of sadness, most of me felt happy. Actually, I hadn't been very happy these few days. After waking up in the palace and realizing my memories were gone, I'd been living very cautiously and trying to adapt myself to the emperor's everything.

The emperor said I was an imperial concubine, but I...

Each and every moment, I tried my best to embrace this role. The emperor that everyone revered and admired gave me his sole affections, yet my heart felt absolutely empty. I didn't know what it was that I really wanted.

—

The burlap sack had long been removed from my body to be replaced with a high-quality cloud-pattern brocade. This man seemed to have no intentions of harming me. I hadn't slept well for a long time, but this time I had a dream. It was both bitter and sweet, yet filled with a pain that tore at my heart...it felt so real that I thought I'd die from the pain.

But as to what exactly happened...I couldn't remember a thing. I was just happy that the painful dream wasn't real, yet also regretful. At the very least...I was missing something very important from my life, something that couldn't return once it was lost.

A drop of ice-cold something fell on my face. My eyelashes trembled as I frowned and opened my eyes. My face was damp, and my eyes felt wet. I carelessly wiped away the warm liquid with my sleeves, my heart

strangely bitter. Was this a raindrop, or a teardrop...?

Right now, my body was devoid of energy, sore and numb as well as pained...I'd been paralyzed for too long so my bloodflow was a bit sluggish, and even lifting a hand took supreme effort.

Argh, to hell with it!

I looked around me and realized the place was desolate and uninhabited. I was in the middle of a bamboo forest, lying on the damp ground. I felt...a bit uncomfortable. Why was I lying here alone?

Where did the assassin go? So irresponsible...

With a pa-ta, something else splashed on my face. Raising my face, I saw...the verdant leaves of the bamboo covered with dewdrops at their tips. Another droplet slipped past my collar, the cold enough to make me tremble...but it'd cleared my mind as well.

My feelings were dejected and hard to explain.

How unlucky, I couldn't even force out enough strength to prop myself up, so I'd have to endure the onslaught from the dripping dewdrops. ... speaking of which, why would that assassin abandon me here? He hadn't hurt me or left any marks on my body, but took advantage of my unconsciousness to hustle away. What was the meaning of this?

I weakly crawled forward a bit before I heard the sound of beating wings. The emerald green leaves surged like a wave as a thing rustling

sound came from one side. My eyes grew wide. Within the dark green depths of the bamboo stalk was a white-robed silhouette, his steps distinct and clear upon the dry leaves. When he brushed aside some leaves, I saw a tall figure holding a qin appear before me. The sunlight shining on his form made his long black hair beautiful, and his face had a mild, gentle expression.

I was gobsmacked, and my heart beat wildly. His face and figure filled my vision—those white robes like snow, and that teardrop-shaped mole by the corner of his eye that made him seem like he was weeping. The moment he saw me, he froze in place, not moving a muscle. Though the distance between us was still far, I could clearly see that the serenity of his face had been broken. The qin in his hands fell to the ground...and its strings thrummed.

At that moment, I finally recalled the thing I had forgotten in my dream...

It was a pair of eyes that bore the weight of thousands of 10,000 years of worry, filled with yearning as they looked at me, just like this moment... why did it feel so real?

A warmth crept up from my stomach, uncomfortable and sore, and an unknown gathering of true qi started churning in my dantian region. I wanted to suppress its wild circulation, and stretched out my hand towards that Immortal to beg for help. But my throat felt blocked, and before I could open my mouth, a pain in my chest turned my vision blurry...then black.

This time, I had fainted for real.

Chapter 47 (Part 2)

My world was pitch-black.

Silence surrounded me, broken by the occasional breeze whistling past. The noises made by the bamboo screens were also pleasing to the ear...

My mind was a mess, and I wanted to open my eyes but lacked the strength. The numbness in my back felt like countless ants crawling past my body. It felt as if I was slowly coming back to life, and only now did I realize I was lying on something very hard, not a cushioned bed but a bamboo plank one.

There was no scent of incense in the room, but something pure and fresh. The sweet and pleasant scent of bamboo couldn't help but relax me. Abruptly, the sound of a bird pecking grains came from a corner, jarring in contrast with the wind-swept bamboo curtains and the poetic charm of the current situation. I frowned a little.

...where was I?

"...Shào'er[1], you have to eat more."

A male voice spoke, warm and soft, with a lightness that rose above the dust of this world.

My foggy mind was completely blank, but my stomach reverted back to its state in the bamboo woods, when I'd first set eyes on him. The

stunning figure of the white-robed man was enough to make my heart palpitate. I suppressed my thoughts and was met with a remarkable silence. In the corner, there was the sound of porcelain, and the heightened noise of the bird pecking at its grain grew in enthusiasm.

A light laugh rose in the air before fading as someone placed a porcelain plate on the ground. That man's voice softened, and seemed to turn more lonely. "Look at you. You don't learn good habits from other people, but got into the habit of being lazy and enjoying food instead..."

Who?

I really wanted to open my eyes, but had no energy. But right at this moment, a pair of hands came down to gently arrange my covers. I could only remain in my nest of a bed as I continued listening. Time seemed to have stopped, leaving nothing but the sound of the wind...

He seemed to stay at the foot of my bed for a long time, almost enough for me to forget he was there until he spoke. "Shào'er, when do you think she'll wake up?"

I had a guess that Shào'er was the name of his bird. How could animals talk with humans? Of course, nobody answered him. Abruptly, a soft, wing-like object swept across my face, swishing until my cheeks felt numb. I couldn't decide whether the sensation was itchy or painful.

It seemed to be the bird. Pah, it had no manners. I gave a small frown.

"Shào'er, don't cause trouble." There was the sound of rustling clothes,

followed by footsteps. It was abruptly followed by muffled coughing above me, as if the person was trying hard to hold it in.

"Yifu, yifu wear more clothes when the weather's cold."

Yifu? There was actually someone raising a parrot who called him his foster father? What an eccentric. He didn't speak, but his breath drew closer and closer to me before I felt him lifting my head. A stream of cool spring water flowed into my mouth, and I unconsciously demanded for more.

Something's not right, what's this soft and warm feeling? What was he using to feed me? Was it...mouth to mouth?!

No way. Before I could react, he carefully laid me back onto the bed, where I lay in shock...

"Shào'er said it right. The weather's getting colder," he murmured to himself. I could hear him taking a seat and breathing lightly. "The weary bird longed for its nest and finally came home." As he finished speaking, a pair of hands came to rest on my bed and properly tuck me in.

Though my eyes were closed, I couldn't help but wonder why his words made me feel so grieved and pained. I tried hard to open my eyes, sensing him gazing at me for a long time. Then he lay by me fully dressed, almost breathing on my face. It was warm, and took a while before his breaths slowed...the sensation was itchy enough to provoke a person. His voice drew closer and closer, but he only kept repeating the same lines by my ear.

"To be able to come back...that is good..." My finger twitched and tightened around the covers. His body smelled so fragrant, not vulgar at all, but...well, in any case it was hard to describe. It smelled like fresh bamboo mixed with flowers...refreshing and cool, but also very familiar. My head lowered for another sniff, and the scent entered my lungs. A buzzing drone sounded in my brain. When the emperor was first attending to me on the bed, I'd smelled this scent as well. Whenever I was nervous, I'd only need to sniff him to relax, and have the illusion that I was safe...

My body fell slack, and I felt a bit weary. To be nestled up to him was very comfortable. I don't know how much time passed before I fell asleep.

—

When I regained consciousness, I was nearly choking. A warm liquid was dripping from my mouth, but the rim of a bowl was still stuck fast to my lips. Someone supported my back, his other hand by my waist. Even with eyes closed, I knew...this position was being used by him to force feed me a medicinal mixture. A strange flavor was present in my mouth...subconsciously, I wanted to refuse.

But at least he was feeding me normally this time instead of using his mouth.

"Be good," a man's voice spoke by my side, the soft but strong tones mixed with an indescribable sense of care and warmth. "You'll get better if you drink this."

His voice had the steadying effect of calming me down, and his scent smelled very nice. I felt as if I was being lulled to sleep, my whole body relaxing. He gave a light laugh and carefully set me back onto the bed, but seemed to have no intentions of leaving. I could feel his gaze resting on my face, as if finding it hard to express his feelings. It was that kind of warmth.

I suddenly felt a little helpless.

"This child is even skinnier than before," those hands stroked my face, even the words were soft-hearted and tangled.

The medicine seemed to have taken effect, because my entire body grew warm. My scalp turned numb as the strange sensation spread throughout my body. After a bout of itchy soreness, my strength seemed to slowly revive. The different feelings in my heart made me want to open my eyes...

The person I saw in the bamboo woods had been very beautiful, his movements unhurried and his heart filled with good intentions. It was rare for him to know the medical arts as well.

More importantly...the beautiful person was touching me. I couldn't help drawing my mouth into a line that grew longer and flatter. Suddenly, the parrot gave a cry that almost sounded like laughter, startling me.

"Yifuyifu..." Beating wings accompanied the bird's queer voice, which was grating to the ears. "Don't disturb her."

The man's hands shrank back, but his kind and gentle touch seemed to linger on my skin. I felt a little disappointed. Still, after a while, he added a serious reply, "Shào'er, you've disturbed her too."

As a result, things ran counter to what I wanted. That guy hadn't said anything and had learned to be a quiet man of few words. But his bird was more meddlesome than any women of dubious character. After being rebuked, its temper grew extraordinary. Luckily, no one had taught it how to curse, so he could only rebel with his actions instead of clumsy words. Its fine little talons beat out a rhythm as it walked over my chest.

I grew fearful...

You guys were two of a kind, both noisy birds. Who could tell me why the argument between the Master and his doted favorite needed to drag me in as well? This rotten bird, it was bullying me since I couldn't move right now, right?

...still stepping on me. I'm already flat enough there...I cry... When I was on the verge of protesting, a warm hand scooped me into an embrace.

"Shào'er, stop getting into mischief. You'll crush her." Surprised, I didn't resist but happily bore with his hold. He seemed to have chased away the pet with his sleeves. The weight on my chest lightened, and I finally took a breath, but stiffened in the middle of my exhale.

That person was protecting me as if I was his young, showing me the utmost solicitude as he caressed me. His movements were accurate and certain. I did my best to ignore him, enduring to my limit. Perhaps our positions were to blame, but strands of his hair landed on my face,

extremely uncomfortable and ticklish.

It was very warm inside his embrace, up to the point that I felt like crying.

A long breath followed as I stubbornly pretended to be asleep, resting my face in the front of his robes. The material wasn't very good, and the coarse threads against my face felt uncomfortable. Speaking of which, those slippery, jade-like hands of his were even better preserved than a woman's. Those long and slender fingers lingered on my face, stimulating me and my closed eyes.

Come on, then...touch me some more, don't be so polite. My eyes narrowed as I hummed in rapture...

Suddenly, a sharp string of pain shot up my back. I hurriedly freed the hand resting by his waist, feeling panicky and pained...and almost fell to the ground before he caught me as I rolled. Much to my surprise, my eyes abruptly flew open, and I saw the face that had made my breathing so difficult. He was elegant and mild, with long eyebrows over eyes that were hard to meet. There was an indescribable feeling when I saw his face, and the teardrop-shaped move by the corner of one eye...was alluring and enchanting.

My heart pounded as I grasped the robes before my chest, flabbergasted. I was afraid to get closer to him because I worried my heart wouldn't be able to bear it, and explode. This made me uneasy... there were too many nameless feelings flooding through me now. What was wrong with this body? My mouth opened a few times, the voice hoarse and sandy as if on the verge of being lost. "Let...me go."

He wrinkled his brows as he heard this, and relaxed his grip. Without him, my body suddenly slid down until my head knocked hard against the bed.

Curses...

I supported my body as I rubbed my head. It really hurt.

"Serves you right serves you right," The mung-bean eyed parrot started getting lively.

"I was saying, you should've woken up long already," that beautiful man didn't say much, but kept his mouth flat, as if he was laughing. The parrot jumped back and forth on his shoulders, flapping its wings as it pecked at its feathers, an emerald-green butt turned towards me.

I resisted the urge to pull out his feathers and lay back down, my heart filled with violent turbulence...I couldn't even speak. I kept feeling that this doted favorite was a little superfluous.

"You cultivated a strange martial arts, but your state of mind shouldn't have changed too much," he said lightly, sitting on the bed. His eyes were on the hand supporting my body rather than looking at me. Afterward, he sighed as if coming to a decision, grasping my hand to check my pulse. "These years you've weakened your body, so you'll need to take more tonics to bolster your health."

"You..."

I looked at him, blinking in hesitation before asking a classic question. "Why am I here and who are you?"

His smile was gentle as he gave me a deep look, face as calm as water while he replied. "I am Fang Hua."

This young master's name was so eminent. It really was as they say, the name matched the person...I spaced out for a while, openly admiring his handsome face. I was always happy to strike up a conversation with beautiful men. Catching his hand, I asked another question. "Was it you who captured me to this place?"

"I don't know why you'd be here. I wanted to ask you..." he lowered his head to peer at my wolf's claws, a little surprised, but didn't avoid me. Instead, he gave me an elegant look, holding a smile. "I'm afraid that you might have forgotten completely about everything." Though the words were light and his face was serene, the feeling I felt was that there were many things left unsaid.

Beautiful men were just like so.

Something surged in my chest, but I didn't have time to consider the meaning of his words. I only gave him an enthusiastic look with my eyes.

"Rest a bit, I'll come check on you again later." he pulled up the covers and covered my body, but after he tucked me in...I withdrew my head to carefully peer at him. Drooping eyelashes, an astonishing dark red mole by the corner of one eye. He was clearly a handsome man, cold as the splendor of the moon but filled with an illusion that suggested someone

lonely and laden with grief...

He softly shut the door from outside.

I remained dazedly pondering over the events that had just happened, hands clutched tight around the same fragrant bedcovers. My eyes narrowed as I sucked in a deep breath, sniffing a few more times before I realized something...

What did he say his name was?!

AhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhFang Hua....

Stupor.

No wonder I thought he seemed so grieved. The third-wheel mistress in his relationship had ended up right at his doorstep...why wouldn't he be depressed? Curses! That despicable kidnapper had tossed me by his house.

Blunt!

Real blunt!

It had to be the work of an arch-enemy. I probably owed them too much silver from before, so now they were humiliating me. How was I going to get along with the emperor's male concubine?

[1] Shào-er (少儿) —this is a different word and pronunciation from Shao'er (勺儿), which uses the second tone sháo. You can listen to shào'er vs. sháo'er with the links. 少 means "small, little, young," while 少儿 together could also mean "child." This is also different from the pseudonym Shao'er used on Nongyu in chapter 20, which was Shào Yu (邵玉).

[https://www.mdbg.net/chindict/chindict.php?
page=worddict&wdrst=0&wdqb=%E5%B0%91%E5%84%BF](https://www.mdbg.net/chindict/chindict.php?page=worddict&wdrst=0&wdqb=%E5%B0%91%E5%84%BF)

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page=worddict&wdrst=0&wdqb=%E5%8B%BA%E5%84%BF](https://www.mdbg.net/chindict/chindict.php?page=worddict&wdrst=0&wdqb=%E5%8B%BA%E5%84%BF)

Chapter 48 (Part 1)

The door was still swinging lightly on its hinges, but the person was gone. I remained dazed for a while before looking down and viciously pinched myself. The pain was tremendous...

There was no mistake. That Immortal-like being really existed, and his name was Fang Hua.

Now that I was more clear-headed, my first thing upon becoming alert was to feel my own body. I slipped beneath the covers and looked left and right, even opening up my robes for inspection. Tsk, my body didn't feel pained, itchy, or sore...

Some assassin had sneak-attacked me in the palace, then did a poor job of carrying me out and jolting me all this way. Yet I didn't even have any bruises. Did someone give me medicine already, or was I innately blessed with a sturdy body? Or perhaps the assassin had no intentions of harming me at all and took measures to protect me...

But why did he leave me outside Fang Hua's house?

—

It was really weird. I stuck my head out of the covers and took a long breath. The room was very quiet, and that lousy bird had flew away as well. I stayed on the bed and straightened out my messy robes, looking around the room. There were bamboo curtains, a landscape painting on a wall, accented with straight and forceful written words that gave it a

certain charm. It seems like the owner of the house had made it himself with bamboo, and the feeling against my hands was...very agreeable. The workmanship was meticulous as well.

Rubbing my eyes, I casually put on my shoes and sat on a chair, pouring myself a cup of water to drink. It was cool and refreshing spring water that carried a hint of sweetness. This cup was made from a thick bamboo tube, extremely smooth to the touch. Someone had faintly carved 'Fang Hua' into the surface, and my lips puckered at the sight. Resting my head on my hands, I stuck my legs up in the air and dangled in my chair, eyes spinning.

Everything here was good, but it lacked food.

This Fang Hua, an Immortal-like man who looked as beautiful as a flower, wasn't planning to starve me, right?

I pouted, hands over my empty stomach as I shifted to the door and pulled it open with both hands. Glittering sunlight shone down in its radiance to saturate my entire body. It was extremely warm and bright enough to make it difficult to open my eyes. Soft rustling accompanied a sudden burst of cool wind.

It carried with it the sound of a child's voice.

I shook my head to clear my eyes, but the walkway before me was empty. Still, I hadn't walked more than a few steps before my feet started to pivot, and my head grew dizzy. I supported myself with the wall to try and invigorate myself, eyes narrowing as a few figures appeared on the walkway and grew clearer.

A preteen youth had two cooked eggs stuffed in his shirt, rubbing his hands as he blew on them. "Come help take these off me."

The other walked leisurely in front of him, not even bothering to look back. "How come?"

"Because I cooked the eggs, started the fire, and hid the evidence from your yifu. You want to eat them just like this?"

"Of course not," the thinner and more emaciated of the two stopped, pausing before speaking valiantly. "You have to peel the skin off for me before I eat it."

"Y...y-you, don't be too over the top." the egg-holder was angry enough to rush up, his face delicate and pretty, exactly like a younger copy of the current emperor.

"You cooked the stolen eggs and lit the fire, so the blame is still on you..." the other gave him a habitually leisurely glance, a toothy smile lighting up that filthy, dark face. The teeth were very white. "I'll go tell yifu right now."

"I'll peel it, I'll peel it. Isn't that enough?" the little emperor was completely dejected. When he got no reaction from pulling the other's sleeve, he set his heart and stomped the ground. "At the worst, I'll give them both to you."

"Peel," the infuriating voice drifted over.

The other obediently lowered his head and peeled as told. One ate the eggs in satisfaction while the other wore a long face, but a smile tugged at his lips as if he took pleasure in it.

I gave a snort, feeling as if I'd seen this familiar scene somewhere before. Yet in the space of a blink, the air around me flashed, and the two youths disappeared from the walkway. My mind suddenly buzzed, and I hastily walked to where they'd been before. When I looked down, there wasn't even the trace of eggshells from before.

Did I started hallucinating from hunger?

The wind blew gently, rustling the bamboo forest. I wandered about in a circle before raising a fist to pound my head. How evil. Looks like I was really starving to the limit. Now the most pressing matter was to fill my stomach.

I sucked in a breath, slowing turning around to look at the different rooms. I remained still for a while before intuition had me pushing open a certain door and peeking inside. Hey, what do you know...I guessed right.

I'm crying, crying tears of joy.

Slipping into the kitchen, I lifted the lid of a cooking pot to reveal... nothing. My hand felt inside. Not only was there no oil, but even a layer of dust had settled on my hands. My eyebrows quivered, and I squatted down to take a look.

Great, there wasn't even a fire for the stove.

Cruelty even extended this far... That Immortal-like man, was he really planning to starve me to death? I'd always been a person who loved to eat, and I ate a lot. In the palace, I'd never had to suffer this way. If I had a choice of dying, I'd never choose to starve to death.

Time was pressing as I searched the entire room for food, even opening up the cabinets in my hunt. Besides two or three broken bowls with missing pieces, there was nothing inside. What did Fang Hua usually eat? Tears...

My footsteps kept walking until I paused to look around suspiciously. Raising my head, my nose sniffed the air until it caught the miraculous scent of something delicious. Holding back my drool, I couldn't help but involuntarily follow the scent, turning left around a corner before I bumped into a tall figure standing before a building.

He seemed to have been waiting for me, and caught me as we bumped. This time, I lifted my head to give him a smile that wasn't quite a smile, a chill creeping up my back as my scalp turned numb.

This man's face was enough to bring calamity to the country and its people with his beauty. Add that to the mole by his eye and he was even more seductive. If he didn't smile, he was like an Immortal, but one smile could cause more evil than an evildoer.

"Have you seen enough?" One of his hands held my waist in an embrace as his eyebrows raised slightly, before he lowered his head to

muffle another cough.

...that expression, what was he embarrassed about?

I opened my eyes wide to blatantly stare at him before realizing our current situation was inappropriate. Slowly, I cupped my hands in a greeting. "Just now I've offended you." I backed away quite a few steps, but couldn't help shooting him a glance again.

He gave a start before his eyes curved into crescents. Both eyes and eyebrows seemed to suggest he was smiling.

Only after I backed away did my mind clear up. The one who'd held me in the arms and madly ate tofu behind my back, why was I...

How nefarious.

Fang Hua lowered his head to smile and caught me in place. Time seemed to stop. He didn't speak, nor did I have anything to say. I gave him a dull look, but it wasn't until my line of sight drifted down that I noticed something in his hand...a bowl resting in his palm.

To tell you the truth, his looks were more outstanding than mine. His upper robes were violet and very elegant. Even if he was holding a paltry bowl, a beautiful person would always have the grace of a beautiful person. The hand holding the bowl had long, tapered fingers like uncut jade that looked even fairer and more clear against the porcelain.

I raised my head and sniffed. What was he holding in his hand?

Fang Hua looked at me with a smile, body shifting to leave open a space. Conveniently enough, it gave me unimpeded vision to a table in an inner room filled with warm dishes and white rice. My grateful amazement came from being unexpectedly rescued from a desperate situation. After that flash of joy, reason came in to hold back my impulses, and I gave him a doubtful look before shrinking back like a defensive hedgehog.

It was very simple...

This person held a strange attitude towards me. He didn't treat me coldly, or frown and scowl while singularly facing his rival in love. Instead, he was kind and genial. This room was even stranger. At times, unreal images would spring from within, and my eyes rested on that steaming hot bowl after I couldn't take it anymore...

I swallowed. So fragrant...it whetted my appetite even more than the imperial kitchens, but there was no promise he didn't add something inside.

You should be guarded in the outside world.

"I haven't cooked in a while, so I don't know if it's to your tastes," he said simply, rolling back his sleeves to offer me the bowl in his hand. I had no way to retreat, but fell on my butt on the threshold of the door, the pain jarring. A smile split his features, making me even more nervous.

This smile...

Even the curve of his lips was strange.

"You're always muddle-headed like this." He supported me to my feet, helping me lean against the door while bending down to wipe away the dust that had settled onto my person. My eyebrows arched up high.

W...w-what was he doing, I'm afraid...

He hadn't tied up his hair, and the strands fell like a waterfall across his shoulders. A few threads of sunlight broke through the windows to shone on him. They actually favored such a cold and cheerless person. Flustered, I shifted my eyes until they rested on the food at the table.

If I remembered correctly, when I snuck into the kitchen the pots and bowls were all covered in dust. That state of affairs was so wretched that I didn't have the heart to look anymore. The cold stove didn't seem to have a fire in it before, or any signs of being used to cook things. Then...where did these dishes come from?

Was it possible that this man knew sorcery?!

"What's wrong? Your face is so pale, do you feel unwell somewhere?" He showed such care towards me. When he raised his hand, he didn't forget how he'd dusted me off with his sleeves, and touched the bowl again.

It gave me a chill...

"Did you cook all these personally in the kitchens?"

"Exactly so."

I raised my head, peering at his benevolent expression, the smile like someone preparing to help the needy and deliver all creatures from torment. I thought it was very suspicious. Was this person here to give me an upset stomach with his food sorcery, or trying to poison me with secret pills?

Someone who was unaccountably solicitous usually hid evil intentions.

As a result, I circled around him to assess and appraise him anew. I wasn't close with him and upon investigation into the past...Little Li said I'd always served close by his side. While he was in the Cold Palace, I'd stolen away the emperor and caused a bit of drama before dumping him and slipping away. No one had ever made any inquiries despite his long stay in the Cold Palace. More or less, I was probably to blame.

He ought to despise me, but now he stood before me with chopsticks and bowl in hand, seemingly at a loss. I decide to wait and see. This Lord Hua, ever since I woke up...he'd acted unnaturally odd. As for the food he'd cooked personally...should or shouldn't I eat it?

Kindness deserved a serious investigation.

Actually, I had a personality that like gentleness and feared severity. To put it in vulgar terms, I was base and cheap. When I wasn't hungry, or when I was hungry but afraid to eat, these two types of people had two

completely different ways of dealing with me.

If it was the emperor, he'd pretend not to hear all my rejections and feed me from the bowl. The more I refused, the happier he'd be to feed me. Afterward, he'd hold me in his arms and stroke here and there until I was free from worries and only half as angry. This was akin to hitting me with an impressive stick first, then making a show of conciliation to bring things under control, very similar to how he'd wrangle control with his vassals.

But the Fang Hua before me was much softer. He'd set the bowl of rice aside and sat down to look at me before walking off. Somehow he returned with a big bowl of braised meat, feeling greatly pleased as he held it towards me. When I didn't take it, he turned back to wash the chopsticks with boiling water before silently setting everything before me.

I gave it a look. It smelled completely delicious, and was even meat...

No matter how I tried to contain myself, it was hard to fight my appetite. Immediately, I went into a rapture and stopped worrying about too many things. Like a self-important elder, I rolled up my sleeves and impatiently picked up a mouthful. Before I stuffed it into my mouth, the last thread of rational thought woke me up. I raised my eyebrows and peered at him, before putting my piece in his plate.

He...

...remained leaning over from there, concentrated on looking at me.

I motioned him to eat it.

He remained as before.

I say...if he didn't eat it, how could I dare to?

Thus, I set down the chopsticks and copied the emperor, waving my hand indifferently like telling Little Li to take the food away. This wasn't the palace, so of course there was no Little Li. Neither could I pretend to be indifferent because I really was very hungry.

As a result, Fang Hua was stupefied. I felt dejected. After a long while, I huddled up on the chair and hugged my legs while he stared at me and I stared at the rich, oily meat.

Purify one's heart and reduce the desires.

Protect against desire, protect against desire...

He seemed extremely unconvinced as he glanced at me. "Not eating?"

I shook my head.

He gave a doubtful interjection before standing up wordlessly, not giving me a glance before carrying away the meat and dumping it into the bamboo forest. I could only look dully towards his back.

While I was hanging my head to fantasize about creating more red braised pork, Fang Hua turned back from the forest and carefully withdrew an oil-paper package wrapped around a savory baked sweet potato.

After handing it over, he created some distance between us, lying on a chair as he rested a chin on his arms with a smile and raised eyebrows. This expression would become one of my favorites in the future, but to a person with no memories, it was only extremely horrifying.

Thus, I carefully pinched off a piece of sweet potato and held it by his mouth. His brows pressed until they were almost touching, expression intent of fearfully avoiding the morsel. I think anyone who saw his reaction would fear whatever food he offered...

As a result, I stayed hungry for an entire day despite the sight of food.

What's the concept of starving for an entire day? It was using a large ladle of cold well water to fill the burning pain in your stomach until it stopped hurting. Even walking felt more like floating, and the inside of the stomach sloshed with water.

Meanwhile, Fang Hua had disappeared to who-knows-where. I felt my stomach as I wobbled to the outhouse. After squatting down...I couldn't get back up. This feeling was familiar: sore thighs, sharp pain in the stomach. My brows furrowed as I glanced down. Then my hand felt there, and great...

A handful of blood.

I stared before looking towards my trouser pocket, hey...

Who helped me put a layer of cloth there?

Horror!

There was no one else in this house but me, Fang Hua, and a lousy bird. He really had the heart of a Bodhisattva who found pleasure in helping others.

...looks like he'd seen through me.

—

I dizzily lifted my pants, head lowered as I used the door to support me and walk out. After figuring out what was the matter, my body felt a lot better. A glance around revealed no water in sight, so I could only wipe my hand on my robes before accidentally spotting a stunned Fang Hua looking at me from below a tree.

I instantly grew vigilant, body straightening like a ramrod as my legs clamped together. With these excellent guarding preparations, I finally propped my hand against the tree and played the part of a profound thinker, eyebrows knitted. "Do you need anything?"

I lifted my eyes to look. He seemed constrained and took a while before fishing out a proper cloth pad from behind his back, fingers shaking as he held it in his hands. I gave a careless look and said simply, "What's this thing?"

"I guessed that you'd need this, so I prepared it for you."

I nodded and he happily handed it over, but I didn't take it. Instead, I casually took his robes to wipe my hands. He shook, but endured it without avoiding me... Heaven knew what he was thinking, chances are he probably wanted to castrate me. My blood had dirtied his violet robes, yet he still looked at me with the same sincere expression as before. I gave him a frank look in return, not speaking.

The base of his ears slowly grew red as he spoke. "I made a record that it'd come today, but I didn't expect to pick you up from my doorstep, or that you'd even return...so I didn't have time to prepare anything."

That's right, my period had come.

But how would he know? Not to mention, this record of his had other miscellaneous things, he sure had free time...wait, it couldn't have been that while I was in the palace...sweats, this previous Master of mine sure was intimate, he even took the trouble to track little things like this for his servants.

"I learned how to tie these things so they won't fall off, I can help you."

I pushed away his hands. "No need."

Seeing his desolate expression, my heart felt a little strange, so I added another line. "Much thanks."

He didn't speak, and I walked off. I didn't stop until I was far away, but couldn't stop from looking behind me. A long way off, his form stood slim and graceful beneath the tree. The expression on his face...

How to say it, it was indescribable. More miserable than simple loneliness, and somewhat out of sorts.

Chapter 48 (Part 2)

I'd never seen anyone with an expression like that. For a moment I was alarmed, clutching my chest as I gently sucked in a breath. All I wanted to do was to leave him quickly, the farther the better...but the yearning gaze in his eyes was like a curse before my gaze. Though the distance between us was large, I could still faintly discern his words as they drifted towards my ears.

【 I can't get back the life from those first days. I've already missed my opportunity. Why is it that even now, I'm never given a chance? 】

I stared blankly before raising my hands to cover my ears. What was the matter, was I so hungry that I was hearing things now? Flabbergasted, I looked at him. He was clearly a long way off, and his lips hadn't even moved, but his voice had clearly sounded next to my ears, heartbroken and depressing...

The grief in my heart was followed by a numbness in my limbs that filled the air. The scene before me seemed to shift, and I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, another wave of dizziness hit me. My body couldn't hold out and my legs gave way before me. I fell to the ground, hand trying to reach for something but finding nothing to hold onto. Haziness filled my vision as I saw his panicked yet helpless expression.

Very good, even a cold and cheerless person like him had moments of unrest within his heart, very good...

As it turned out, the feeling of hunger could cause a person to faint. Before my eyes, everything grew dark.

A fragrant aroma greeted me as I regained consciousness. It was already evening in the skies as I lay on the bed feeling nothing but hunger. My whole body was curled up, lightly sniffing the aromatic bedcovers. Already at my limits, I lifted up the fabric and started chewing.

The door to the room suddenly opened as Fang Hua helplessly appeared by my side, holding a bowl as he looked at me. His face carried an exhausted melancholy that had pervaded his mind and body. Looking as cold as snow, he crouched by my side as if begging, a hand extending a spoon my way.

I blanked out, a corner of the covers still in my mouth.

He seemed stunned as well, but didn't laugh, only quietly tugged the object out of my mouth. A hand smoothed out the fabric, still damp with my saliva, the fingers slim and pretty. But nothing could smooth out the worried cramping of his brows...

"Foolish, how could you be afraid of eating the things I've made? Are you worried I added things inside? How could I poison you?" He picked up the spoon again and got a bit of rice. Seeing I had no response, he grew troubled. Head lowered, he gently blew across the spoon, complexion paler but still wearing a smile. "Be good...eat a little."

I stared blankly at him.

"If you won't eat, I can make other things," he said in disappointment. But I grabbed him in response, hand knocking against the bowl of rice. It smelled delicious...

Atop the white rice grains lay an entire fish, its body covered in a dense and creamy sauce. The meat and blood had been cooked until tender and soft, and small bits of scallion were scattered on top.

There was clearly tasty meat here, so why did he first scoop a spoonful of rice? Also, what kind of person ate fish with a spoon? My heart had softened long before, but I still wanted to nitpick. I gave a slow push, one hand rubbing the knee of his robes as I glanced at his bowl with a soft reply. "The dishes from the imperial palace are much tastier."

"I'm sorry..."

I hmped through my nose, unwillingly seizing the bowl from his hands before wolfing the contents down.

He smiled.

Embarrassed, I picked out a fish bone. Seeing no chopsticks in sight, I pinched a piece with my fingers and looked at him. "I can't eat this much, do you want some?"

As a result, he did as asked and sucked on a few mouthfuls. I picked up some more, and he ate as before in silence. But those elegant brows slowly wrinkled, and that face grew deathly pale. Rising to his feet, he

covered his face with his sleeves before running outdoors and throwing up.

Shocked, I turned over my stained and oily hands, not sure whether or not I should wipe them. He actually turned back and gave me a serene smile, saying weakly, "Please don't mind me, I'm just not used to or enjoy eating such strong foods. There's definitely no poison...urk..."

Facing this, I was speechless.

I lowered my head to study the fish. It was full of thorns and looked rather ugly, but the taste was fresh and tender...with food here, I didn't have to drink well water anymore...it really was a joyous occasion. While I was settling into my happiness, Fang Hua was experiencing exceptional sorrow.

—

This was how the day passed. Fang Hua didn't ask about my name or my origins, or why I'd be in front of his house, as if I'd fallen prey to a plot. He seemed completely indifferent yet well acquainted with everything about me, taking the trouble to try hard and look after me.

This feeling was very bizarre. At morning the next day, I carried a bamboo rocking chair to the walkway and sat down with my hands behind my head, eyes closed, enjoying the wind as it rustled past bamboo leaves, carefree and relaxed.

Perhaps it was because my eyes were shut so all I could see was

darkness, but my hearing was unusually sharp. There was a melody floating within this breeze...that qin sound was melodious as water-splashed jade, particularly pleasant to the ear like sounds of nature.

It was also very familiar...

Lying on the deck chair, head pillowed on my hands, I listened closely with my eyes shut for a while with my finger tapping out a rhythm... before I couldn't resist humming along. It seemed as if every beat and tone in this song had been carved deeply into my heart, like it used to be a part of myself.

My eyes flew open, pupils crystal clear as I went to search for the song...

Yet suddenly, I sensed someone staring at my back with rapt attention. Alarmed, I turned around. The wind kept blowing through the sea of bamboo, their leaves caught in a prolonged heave and surge. Vaguely, I could see a small pavilion within the forest. A pale violet silhouette was sitting upright, wearing long robes with wide sleeves as he played the qin.

The first rays of the morning sun shed their radiance in torrents upon the earth...his body seemed covered with a layer of golden light, fingers alit with a gentle light.

What a scene.

I lifted my robes and bent forwards to run over, pushing aside the

irksome bamboo to spy on him. His head was lowered as he played with single-hearted devotion, a small pot heating slowly by his side. Slow trails of light smoke, infused with the faint scent of medicine, floated up into the air. Those calm and collected features coupled with those smiling eyes to join an upturned mouth as he waved a hand.

Abruptly, the music changed. Though the melody remained the same, the key was a bit odd. My eyebrows minutely furrowed, caught in a moment of stupefaction as I gathered my robes and sleeves to stare at Fang Hua playing the qin. I took a step forward and bent over to press his hands in place.

"That's wrong."

He smiled at me as if he long anticipated that I'd come, gracefully stilling his fingers before making a gesture of invitation. "Then, please grant me your instruction."

I wasn't polite at all, but sat down to sit next to Fang Hua, raising my eyebrows at him. Stretching out my arms, I dangled my sleeves a few times to expose my hands, bowing my head to assume a yielding manner before imposingly resting my fingers over the strings.

Eh, how do I play this?

Squinting slightly, I tried to remember.

My fingers suddenly turned nimble as they began to move. The parrot on his shoulder gave me a look full of curiosity before hurriedly leaving

him for a corner, eyes whirling as he stared at me.

I pretended not to notice.

He looked at me very quietly, loose hair drifting lightly by his jacket. A few fragrant strands floated to my cheek...an indescribable aroma that was identical to the one from his body, like the scent of flowers mixed with bamboo, as well as the faint smell of medicine.

I couldn't help but lose my concentration. Yet even though I was thinking of something else with my thoughts floating in the wind, my fingers never stopped plucking at the strings. The melody flowed out like spring water, jubilant and cheerful, but the music was laden with grief.

What was going on? There was too much I didn't understand about the memories of this body. The more I played this song, the more I hurt...

Lowering my voice to suppress my unease, I lightly replied, "I think it should be played this way."

"Is that so." He smiled, eyes soft and gentle. He'd gotten very close to me...no, it should be that I'd unconsciously drew closer to him until my breaths were against his hair. My heart was pounding as I peered at him. His gaze seemed to look at me with profound meaning. I followed it to examine myself, where I'd pressed against his waist to take advantage of the qin.

Heart thumping wildly, I quickly withdrew my hands, saying in a low voice, "I'm sorry, I've been excessive."

He only smiled without speaking and scooted over.

Panicked, I quickly stood up but didn't get my bearings. My body fell backwards onto something soft as he held me and drew closer. Assuming the posture of plucking a string, he spoke a string of words that sounded like streaming water by my ear. "I learned this song by ear. Then, I happened to meet you by accident...I just wanted to change the heavy sorrow that used to be part of this melody."

I looked at him, astonished and unconvinced. "Who wrote this song?"

He touched the qin, looking a bit lonely. "There was a person named Zang, styled Hua, who used to play this song every time he appeared in the jianghu. I've only heard it once before."

"Your enemy?"

He looked at me and laughed, but didn't answer. Only a fingertip hooked around a string as he raised his hand, playing with a lonely expression.

"I ask the world how many sorrows it held

A single evening brought autumn to the 8,000 year jade

Why not wander instead to distant lands

Reckless and unbridled in the jianghu

Until this life ends?

The idler drinks a flask of wine alone

Leaving behind vast sorrows and joys."

He slowly looked at me and spoke the last two lines very quietly, almost too softly to hear.

"...youth is free, but spring is hard to find[1]."

The medicine must have finished boiling by now, because the steam had rose to rattle the cover, momentarily breaking my concentration. I stared at his face as his words passed by my ears like wind. I wasn't sure why, but my gaze kept drifting to the mole by the corner of his eye. Right now, my heart was aching, and I softened with the wish to reach over and...stroke it.

Was it imagination, or did the color of this teardrop mole look darker than yesterday?

Suddenly, the parrot on the side began to make a racket.
"Hothothothot."

I quickly retracted my rebellious hand, supporting my hands against the table as I looked over. Green Feathers was currently flapping and

flying above the lid of the medicine pot, comical and cute. I couldn't help but laugh, looking up to see Fang Hua's gentle gaze before hastily avoiding his eyes. My hands randomly reached for the qin as I thought of something to say.

"Youth is free, but spring is hard to find...these lyrics are very particular."

"Do you like the changes I made?"

I gave him a flabbergasted look, but still he smiled wordlessly, and the expression in his eyes was something I didn't understand. For a while, neither of us spoke. It was very quiet in the pavilion.

A helpless laugh suddenly burst out from beside me. Fang Hua poured himself a cup of tea, staring at it as he drank. It was a long time before he asked, "Have you lived well these past years?"

I blinked, looking around before realizing he was directing the question to me. Did a mistress deserve to be asked whether she was living well?! This guy, what was he thinking...

He raised his head to look at me, eyes clear yet hard to fathom. I could only say docilely, "I went through a major illness and forget everything from before my life in the palace."

"I know this, but did Zichuan bully you in those days?"

Zichuan?

He could actually use the emperor's taboo name[2].

I had difficulty pulling my face into a forced smile. "His majesty was very considerate of my needs and didn't put on any airs. Everything I ate and used were all good things..." I surveyed our surroundings, raising a finger to emphasize my point. "Everyday, I used pillows of cloud-pattern brocade and slept on a soft bed. There were delicacies and fine food that I didn't even know the names of, and a carriage was always on call outside the grand hall."

He gave a dim smile. "Is that so."

"Of course! Didn't Lord Hua come from there too? You should naturally know how good the palace is."

Against his tenacious brow, those delicate eyebrows knitted together in an expression that caused the viewer distress. His reply was light and petulant. "My impression was of empty rooms, hard chairs, and cold tea. The conversations were superficial and the servants chilly-faced. I thought this place would be better than the palace, but I didn't expect him to treat you so well."

He must be talking about the Cold Palace...

Such an unearthly, scholarly air on such an Immortal-like figure, but why had he ended up in the Cold Palace? And the emperor could bear to let him suffer like so? He looked at me, eyes filled with something I didn't understand...

I seized up as I realized everything was caused by me.

"You're very close with him, aren't you? Do you like him?" he asked, voice clear and bright. Unexpectedly, I felt as if I was dreaming, everything was so unreal.

I thought about the night I'd served the emperor in bed, and my face turned red. Though I looked away hastily, I somehow caught a glance of Fang Hua's hand tightly gripping his robes, his fingers completely white. I gave an astonished look towards his face. His expression was very calm. He only looked at me gently, as if he very much wanted to know.

"I don't know...whether or not I like him. But the emperor really does treat me well. He knows my preferences and favorite foods, and always dotes on me."

"Is that so..."

The wind rustled past the bamboo leaves. Fang Hua looked to be emotionally moved.

I slowly continued. "He's an excellent ruler and a good husband." After the breeze passed, a few strands of hair ended up on my face, covering up my expression as I lowered my eyes for a smile. As before, I spoke without any regard to Fang Hua's feelings. "After you left, his Majesty didn't take in any imperial concubines. Today is the ninth day of the tenth month, does Lord Hua know what day it is?"

There was only silence and the sound of the wind. The bamboo grove had lost itself to a wild and never-ending dance.

"What day is it today..." Within his smooth tone, there was a barely perceptible shift in his mood.

"Originally, it was going to be the ceremony for conferring my title, if I hadn't been snatched out of the palace beforehand."

I propped myself on my hands, turning slowly to look at him. Though it was only a glimpse, my heart abruptly started pounding in shock. I couldn't move my gaze away. Somehow, sometime, he'd stood up, the wind whipping past his thin violet robes. A cold, mournful smile and an anxious, sorrowful expression rested on his brows. Those eyes were like cold moonlight, desolate and sad as they looked out into the distance.

"It really is unfair, having you here by my side to suffer," he said helplessly, his steady voice carrying an echo of disorder within, as if he was trying hard to suppress something. "I think if Zichuan knew you were missing, he'd definitely come look for you."

I was at a loss for words. Actually, I just wanted to try him, but he really was sad. What was the past between Fang Hua and Zichuan? Why was it that whenever I saw his expression, I'd end up like this...

Feelings surged in my heart, pain rushing from its depths. I made a supreme effort to prop myself against the table, but lost my strength to stand, kneeling instead. My nose lingered on the dense smell of medicinal plants as my hand quietly pressed on the front of my robes, against my chest.

It really hurt...

The faint pain in my heart had grown increasingly intense, as if trying to steal my breath away. I wrinkled my brows, extremely uneasy. I forced myself to endure the churning qi and the sharp pain that accompanied it, hearing the sound of wind and footsteps with my ears.

Abruptly, a pair of hands came to support me. I could feel someone pulling me up and raised my head to see Fang Hua's eyes, as clear as autumn waters. His gaze was focused, and a hand reached out to take my pulse. I gave a start, feeling his warmth by my hand. But as soon as I remembered the rumors of the palace...

I hastily pushed him away. "It's fine, I'm okay."

His body looked extremely delicate, and I nearly pushed him into the medicine pot and its decoction. I didn't anticipate this and gave an embarrassed arm to help him up. Yet he only turned away, resuming his normal expression, albeit with a hint of chilliness. I quickly withdrew my hand.

"You..." he held onto to a chair as he sat down, both helpless and a little angry. "You're still like those days in the palace, always picking the perfect time to ask me infuriating questions."

When he looked at me like that, my wits suddenly returned. This was bad, I'd provoked him on his turf. The palace rumors said he was highly skilled in the medical arts and had somehow even caused the death of the previous emperor. It was because of this that he was chased to the

Cold Palace...would I, too...

I lowered my head and felt my neck, shivering with fear.

He didn't speak, but poured another cup of tea, that pitch-black hair following his movements to cascade down his shoulders. Even a lifetime wouldn't be enough to divulge his mood at that moment, his hands slightly shaking. The water flowed to a trickle, the cup full. He spoke after a while of silence.

"Maybe you've forgotten. At that time, you were extremely unruly, changing your looks to become a young male servant at my side. You hovered about me doing this and that and I always had to deal with the aftermath."

Ah...really? I scratched my head.

"But why do I miss those days?" Distraught, a faint hint of grief was on his features as he smiled, a very gratified smile.

It stirred the heartstrings.

"Lord Hua," I knitted my brows, hands on the table as I deliberated my questions. "Were we master and servant? What exactly happened back then?"

Why would I leave the court? How did he quietly slip out of the Cold Palace, and why didn't the emperor look for imperial concubines for five years...? That night, what happened between them?

He looked at me, holding my hand with a soft smile. "Forget about it, it's fine as long as you've lived well." Those last words ended with a sigh that dissolved into the air, leaving an agreeable aftertaste as he pondered. "What's past is past, why bother remembering?"

I looked at him face-on, expressionless.

What was this? Why did I feel like crying when I saw his tranquil, simple expression? Why did I feel unwilling to resign myself to his words? He spoke no more, lightly massaging my hands in his palms with a smile on his lips. He lowered his face to peer at me. "...it's very cold."

I already thought it was a bit chilly. Without daring to look at him, I quickly withdrew my hand and squatted down by the medicine pot, borrowing the warmth of its fire as the scent of medicine filled my nostrils. I was befuddled as I asked him, "Is this the medicine you usually drink?"

It was almost completely boiled dry. A glance inside showed me a small black object.

"Don't touch, I'll do it." He hurriedly rose with support from the table, walking to the medicine pot and squatting down. There was a bowl in his hands, which he used to pour in some brown water. I felt it was unnecessary, but hastily stepped aside, looking at his back, bewildered. Seeing him stooping on the ground like that, I felt my heart suddenly ache.

A beautiful person like this shouldn't do such things...

His back looked very lonely.

I couldn't help, so I circled him a few times before sitting down again. I peeled a few nuts and tossed them at the parrot to peck, but my thoughts weren't there at all. A slow glance saw him using his sleeve to hold a small bowl as he walked over. His expression was peaceful, though his steps were a bit fast. The hot bowl of steaming brown water was placed before me before he swiftly withdrew his hands.

I squinted at him, but his face was expressionless. His looks were outstanding as he folded his hands behind his back, a chilly voice saying indifferently, "This is medicine for you to drink."

I wasn't sick, so why did I need to take medicine?

He raised his eyebrows, but kept his good temper.

"You must have lingering feelings for the emperor," I said, my words sudden and astonishing.

He didn't react.

I smiled until I felt I was overflowing with panic.

If it wasn't for this relationship and its ambiguous connections, why would anyone entrap me...and toss me on his doorstep? I bet he was a formidable person. Now that he was in this awkward position, he could

still take such good care of the emperor's imperial concubine. If that wasn't kindness from the bottom of the heart, it had to be some kind of trick.

There was nothing wrong, yet he wanted me to take medicine.

Seeing that I wasn't moving, he opened his lips slightly. "Your internal energy..."

"Not drinking." I turned my face away.

"As you wish. I have no ability to interfere," he turned and called out gently, "Shào'er, let's go."

"Yifuyifu...wait for me...yifu..." the parrot flapped its wings as it landed on his shoulders. He gave a beautiful smile as he ignored me, extending a hand to copy my way of teasing the parrot as he left...

I stood stunned. For a second, I'd misheard his Shào'er as Shao'er. Leaning against the pavilion, I looked in his direction. Within the depths of the bamboo forest, a smear of violet moved spryly in the breeze. I could faintly see him swiftly move the hand at his side to his front, head lowered as he desperately blew at the air.

I suddenly thought it was bizarre, raising my head to study his silhouette as my hand groped for that bowl of medicine. One touch...and I withdrew again. Curses, it wasn't just hot, but beyond scalding. No wonder he'd walked so fast.

My lips drew into a smile.

This person appeared to be calm and unperturbed, but it was all just an act. For whom did he go to such lengths to preserve his image...? I breathed lightly as I saw his form disappear into the forest, leaving only me in the pavilion. Staring at that bowl of steaming brown water, my eyebrows furrowed and I gave an experimental sniff. It was very fragrant...

It smelled like medicinal plants, but was still strange, as if he'd added lots of things I didn't know...how queer, this bowl of stuff had no medicine I was familiar with, and the liquid was a limpid, amber-hued brown...I sloshed it around and found no dregs of medicine inside.

What did he give me to eat? Just then, he'd mentioned internal energy? I didn't cultivate. Even if I did, that was a thing of the past, so what if I recovered it? I hadn't offended anyone at court, yet I still met with misfortune. There were always people thinking of ways to harm me. As for him...there were too many thoughts that I couldn't penetrate.

Compared to the possibility of being killed, there was the groundless possibility of regaining martial arts skills. I tilted my head, staring at the bowl. My hand brushed against the qin on the table with flowing fingers...drawing across the strings to hear its crisp notes. Extending my hand, I held the bowl of medicine..and dumped it onto the bamboo.

I'd rather not drink unfamiliar things. This was a basic survival principle. The emperor had taught me from the start but unfortunately, I hadn't taken it to heart.

Right now, the only person I could depend on was myself.

[1] youth is free, but spring is hard to find (芳华尽放, 韶华难求) — fanghua jinfang, shaohua nanqiu, another hidden meaning, Fang Hua = “youth”, Shao Hua = “glorious springtime”. When the song is sung with these words in mind, outsiders won’t assume these are people’s names, not simple nouns. [2] taboo name (名讳) — minghui, it was forbidden to speak, write, or give the names of exalted persons in ancient China. More Wiki goodness here.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naming_taboo

Chapter 49 (Part 1)

The morning of a certain day.

I was lying in my room, limbs spread out before turning over to rub against the bamboo pillow, feeling pretty comfortable.

Suddenly, something pushed against the door from outside. The door caught on its bolt and refused to open. I gave a start as my ears rose to listen. From the space between door and doorframe I could hear the sound of rustling clothing. That person stood quietly outside for a bit, seemingly fixing their belt, before a soft and tired voice called out, "Is the one inside awake?"

"Not awake," I covered my head and replied.

He sounded like he was smiling. "The food's been left by the door." Afterwards he hesitated, as if speaking to himself. "Someone not awake can still reply so smoothly, now that's strange."

Are you complaining?

"About that..." he wanted to say, but stopped. There was only the sound of his footsteps by the door.

It was pestering me beyond endurance.

I knitted my brows, straightening up as I rubbed my eyes. "Hurry up if

you've got something to say..." I didn't hear the anticipated reply, but a light cough, sudden and unexpected in the deserted courtyard. It seemed he'd already walked far away...

This person was so weird.

I struggled inwardly before dropping my shoulders to lift aside the bedcovers. My eyelashes drooped while my eyes opened, and I lowered my head to grope beneath the bed for my shoes. After putting them on, I opened the door and was hit with a blast of air that made me shiver. My eyes were as sleepy as slits as I squatted dazedly by the door. I was too lazy to even look for my food, choosing instead to grope around until I my fingers felt a plate. Then I carried it into my room and placed it on the table.

I yawned and went back beneath the covers before falling asleep.

—

Afterwards, I felt something was off. My ears were pressed against the pillow, but there was a fine noise being carried my way. My eyebrows furrowed as I tried to figure it out. It sounded like someone happily pecking at grain. My head turned and I clutched my pillow to look...

As I waited for my blurry vision to clear, I saw a green parrot perched gingerly on the side of a bowl atop the wooden table, burying his head to a merry feast.

So delicious...

This lousy bird, how did it get into my room? Wait, let me think. When Fang Hua delivered breakfast this morning, I carried it inside as usual before sleeping. Could it be...

I rubbed my face with the covers, getting rid of crust from my eyes to sit up and stick my neck over. Huh...looks like I really did forget to close the door. Fang Hua was a good person but too hardworking. He was more timely than the wet nurses at the palace. Before daybreak, he'd finish preparing the food regardless of whether other people or animals were still sleeping. That should be amended.

I yawned again, giving a big lazy stretch. Then I draped my robes over myself and took a look. The food on the table was still warm...there were thick slices of red braised pork, slick with oil, and a small bowl of diced chicken with corn. A single parrot feather floated atop a large bowl of soup.

That little fellow stretched his wings with his back to me, blocking my view completely as he buried his head in the food.

Wait a second...

Was this bird food? It was obvious that it wasn't. Then whose was it eating...acting so shifty-eyed like that.

Curses.

I tightened the belt around my waist, body swaying as I sat by the table

to grab a pair of chopsticks. A single hand wave was enough to brush him onto the table. "Get lost, keep your distance."

The parrot seemed stunned, then utterly discomfited.

I ignored him, lifting the bowl of red braised pork and stuffing it into my mouth...

It stretched out its wings, perching on the bowl of soup as it swooped at me, scattering feathers everywhere as it cried shrilly, "Hooligan."

I sucked up the last traces of oil before shooting him a glance and saying simply, "I am."

It seemed to be a sharp and clever animal who understood me, because it suddenly turned sullen. Those small mung-bean eyes gave a devious glance at the kernels of corn in the diced chicken bowl.

Oi, this was a new dish that I hadn't tried before. I moved aside my sleeves and placed a hand on my waist, grinning as I lifted the dish towards me. The parrot grew indignant as it stuck a claw out to step on the edge of the bowl.

"You want to eat?"

It didn't reply.

"This is...diced chicken!" I picked a piece up with my chopsticks,

holding it in front of him. "Thousands of years ago, you two were the same kind, but you're still so greedy. If you really want to eat it, it's just a domestic animal. Take it and go far."

It rose up, so angry that its feathers were standing on end. I silently ignored him and wiped my mouth with my robes, cursing, to fall so low that I was fighting over food with livestock...thinking back, the palace had everything...tears...

For the sake of a single bowl, we glared at each other. I sighed with feeling as I finished, calmly continuing to finish up the table before me like an autumn wind sweeping everything before it. A head animal was still an animal, and no match for a human, much less a high-quality hooligan like me. Under its hostile gaze, I lifted my eyebrows, dizzy with my success. Before his face, I chomped loudly on the corn, then picked up pieces of chicken to chew. I didn't spare the parrot a glance as I turned to scoop up some rice.

Suddenly, a piece of bird poop went flying through the air to land in my bowl...now that was what you called eye-catching... I lifted my expressionless face to look at the chief culprit. It joyfully flapped its wings, looking delighted—no, looking very delighted.

I was smiling too, lifting my index finger to wave it back and forth. The smile disappeared as I swooped and caught it, intended to pluck its feathers out.

"Yifuyifuyifuyifu," its sharp little mouth cried out in a hurry, as it used all its strength to resist. It hurt when I got pecked, and its glossy feathers thrashed wildly beneath my hands. Its body was extremely smooth and slippery, and a swoop of its feathers had it staggering into flight before it

added under its breath, "Curses!"

It had perfectly mimicked my voice when it learned this word. I laughed aloud. The table had long turned into a mess, food and soup splattered on the ground. A dark shadow fell from skies and a pair of wings struck me behind my head, before the parrot flew towards the exit. I didn't even have time to react before I hear a voice from outside the door.

"I'm telling I'm telling I'm telling..."

This little animal.

If he wanted to tattle to Fang Hua, see if I didn't pluck out all his feathers. I pulled up my robes and broke into a chase. But there was already no sign of the person...ah, I mean the bird.

—

It was already late autumn.

Though the wind was extremely cool, it still felt warm when the sun shone on me. A bamboo pavilion had been erected over a pond, accented with white muslin veils. Vaguely, one could make out a figure dressed in a moon-white robe inside, neither real nor unreal. Astonished, I went to take a look.

He sat on the ground in a thin layer of robes, looking over a few pots as if spacing out. There were many flowers by his side, their fragrance carried by the breath of the wind.

"You woke up?" he asked me.

"Un," I replied vaguely, looking around me. I didn't see anything, so I drew closer to crouch by his side. "What are you doing?"

Truthfully speaking, a person like me didn't have any hobbies beyond minding other people's business.

He lifted his eyes to peer at me. Beneath the folds of his white robes, I could see the tail of that parrot hiding behind his body. He only smiled, just looking.

He seemed so cold that I started to have a guilty conscience. I wondered whether the intelligence and eloquence of this bird had already blabbed out everything to Fang Hua. Forcing a smile, I backed away and prepared to make a stealthy escape.

And yet, he chose this moment to open his mouth, eyes staring intently at me as he spoke like a lonely gentleman of a good family. "I want to brew some wine, but I don't know how."

Ah...

If you didn't know how to brew, would I know instead?! I was still an amnesiac.

I lifted my eyes to look at the skies, but couldn't resist looking back to

him again. he was dressed very simply, but the first rays of the sun that shone on his face outlined his jaw, forehead, and eyebrows, making it a bewitching sight. You could even say it was completely picturesque, like jade so fine it approached the appearance of snow. His charm stopped me and my timidity in its tracks.

I shook my head.

"To want to brew wine...hehe, Lord Hua's tastes are elegant and refined, however..." I pointed with my finger as I glanced uncertainly at his side. "This is the first time I've heard of putting flowers in wine."

He lowered his head, holding back a smile. The curve of his eyebrows seemed to suggest a flirtatious air.

F...flirtatious air?

"Y-you drank alcohol?" I scooted over suspiciously.

"Just a taste," he smiled gently, expression as mild as always. Yet that elegant profile held a different charm than usual.

That... 'just a taste.' I looked over and discovered a large jug of wine by his side, the top off and the contents completely empty. Right now he was leaning against the ground, looking at me as he pointed at the empty wine jug. "There used to be a person who could brew delicious wine every time. But I've wasted all the jugs..."

"I had a passing whim to drink again, I can't capture the same flavor

when I'm brewing, even though I was the one who taught her how to make it in the first place. Now I keep thinking that I'm missing something."

I crouched there as I listened, unsure of how to reply. His hands rested on mine, the mole beneath his eye dark red.

"Can I entreat you...to brew together with me?"

"What entreating?" I rolled up my sleeves. "I'll just go ahead and help you."

I took the chance to glance at the parrot burrowing into Fang Hua's robes and bared my teeth in a show of strength. Since I was helping its master, its tattling wouldn't have much effect on him.

Fang Hua stared at me in a daze. He was very attractive. Blood rushed upwards as I lowered my head, focusing on grinding, picking, and laying out the flowers to dry. He stayed silently by my side, not speaking. Occasionally, I'd look his way and catch his gaze on me every time.

Strangely enough, an odd feeling rose in my chest. It almost resembled fermenting wine, slowly growing sweeter and more mellow. Time flew by like water until the evening sun cast its oblique rays upon us. He quietly watched me as I foolishly continued to work, wasting half my day by his side. My legs had long turned numb by the time the wine jug was full. Taking advantage of my work, he grabbed a small dish with his long, slender fingers and ladled out some wine. Giving me a broad smile, he lowered his head to taste a sip.

"How is it?" After working for most of the day, I was using my sleeves to wipe my face.

"It's been a long time since I've tasted this flavor."

"Really." I took a sip from his plate.

Huh?

This flavor was very queer...it was obviously astringent and not tasty at all, extremely clashing for the taste buds. I choked and started to cough uncontrollably, ladling up a large spoonful of water to rinse my mouth.

The liquid that had just been brewed in the jug tasted like nothing except flowers. There wasn't a hint of alcohol, yet he raised it to his lips and drank greedily...as if it was excellent wine.

This person was pretty weird, enjoying himself like this so much...

I stared at him while he was totally unawares. After a while, it seemed he'd been reckless enough. His body relaxed and sluggishly collapsed in my lap. I stiffened in response, my scalp turning numb as my face grew hot in surprise. "Aiya, what are you doing...a man and woman..." Shouldn't be so intimate together.

My voice gradually faded out.

He raised his head to look at me, not knowing where to point with his

hand holding the jug. He ended up hugging the container to his chest instead. Even his gaze seemed intoxicated, and my attempts at persuasion gave up to let him do as he wanted...

He didn't seem to have any alcohol tolerance at all.

"What exactly is romantic love in this world...?" A soft voice asked searchingly.

Yeah, what exactly was it? My heart echoed his question.

His hand clutched at the front of my clothing as he scooted closer. That tipsy gaze turned towards me as he spokely indistinctly. "How far have you and Zichuan gone? Have you tasted the flavor of romantic love?"

I lowered my head to look at him, probably wearing a strange expression on my face. This guy...what exactly did he want to hear? When I didn't reply for a long time, he drew closer, making me topple backwards from the weight. In the end, he ended up lying on top of me. He seemed to regard me with a disdainful glance that almost seemed a bit cold...and yet, it was a distressful look as well.

Why did he always make my heart pound and ache?

"He's my husband," I forgot to dodge the question and replied honestly. "The two of us are blood relations[1]."

"Teach me. I can do it too..."

He flipped over, hand resting around my neck. His cheeks were as red as peach blossoms, and his eyes seemed to shine with a light that was both intoxicated and stupefied beneath his slender eyebrows. He was looking at me with an expression of suffering...

My chest felt stifled as it strove to beat out of my chest. I hastily pushed him aside and got to my feet in a panic, back facing him as my heart pounded like thunder until it was hard to breathe.

Too shocking.

There was a laugh, but it sounded immeasurably lonely.

Astonished, I turned my head. He was half-lying on the ground, head propped in his hands with effort. Soft light illuminated his features and his beautiful expression of longing as he gave a self-ridiculing laugh. "Look at me..." Fang Hua kept laughing until his body trembled, before finally hiding his face away. His voice was low as he spoke. "It seems that we've only met recently. Yifu shouldn't scare you like this..."

He was drunk, so I couldn't tell whether he was laughing or crying. At the very least, he was still clutching the wine jug to his chest, and that laugh was cold enough to chill the liver. For a long time afterwards, I remembered the words he spoke.

He said, in the lonely dusks to come, only that jug of wine could be warmed...

I didn't understand him then. By the time I did, it was too late.

[1] blood relations (肌肤之亲) —jifu zhiqin, basically bonded by blood, or family.

Chapter 49 (Part 2)

Nightfall.

“Boooring.” I held a book between my fingers, heaving a sigh as I leaned on my chin, spacing out. My eyes stared at the lamp light as one hand waved the flame back and forth. The window was shut tight, leaving only the sound of waving bamboo like the sea.

This uninhabited junk of a place had no place for strolls or anywhere to go. I could endure that, I could even deal with the lack of music, but there ought to be other diversions....curses, there was nothing on the bookshelves but medical texts, not even one of those popular pornography books.

The candle flame gave a sputter, sending the odor of hot wax into the air. I withdrew my hand from the heat, tossing aside the book in my hands as I swept the tabletop of peanut shells. My brows furrowed as I banged the table angrily and stood up.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhh, I can’t live like this anymore!”

A spark of something called ‘discontentment’ burned in my chest. Lofty and unyielding, I waved aside my sleeves and strode out the doors. By the time I reached the back corridors, half of my arrogant bluster vanished when I realized no one was in the courtyard. Besides the sound of wind through the bamboo, there was nothing else. Even the usually noisy parrot stared at me dispiritedly from a branch...his eyes gleaming. A thrill of horror ran through me as I backed up three steps.

The despicable bird was looking at me like I was a thief. A wild wind swept through the withered branches as girl and bird stared face-to-face in a silent battle.

"Hungry. Food, food," The parrot's claws stepped on the branches as it leapt a few times, retracting its gaze in a show of conciliation while it lowered its head to peck at its feathers, as if blindly searching for bugs to eat.

Ever since the day Fang Hua randomly took me in, he'd given me a giant pile of candles, each brand new and wrapped in white paper packaging. But he...rarely used them. Sometimes, he'd stand outside my room to take advantage of the light. After I'd shut him out, he'd use the moonlight as a guide to walk back, his retreating figure ever desolate and lonely...

I stamped my feet a few times until I warmed up, thinking hard. It'd be good to take the chance and convince him not to be so economical. When I returned to the palace, I'll get the emperor to give him some silver. With the nights so dark, how was a person to pass their days?

I earnestly nodded to myself before rushing back into the room, crunching my way past peanut shells. Squatting on my heels, I crawled under my bed until I found a candle and proudly patted it a few times. Then I walked to Fang Hua's door by moonlight and lightly knocked a few times.

"Are you asleep?"

There was the faint sound of a bed creaking, followed by the rustling noise of someone putting on their clothes.

"I'll open the door shortly."

"How about you keep lying down, I'll let myself in," I replied carelessly, taking a hairpin out of my hair to insert between a crack in the door. I jiggled it up and down a few times before pushing it open. The moment I raised my eyes, I saw a figure still in shock.

"That..." he seemed to be smiling, before leisurely adding, "So it's true that no manner of door can stop you, no matter how good the quality."

"Heh, heheheh," I smirked, laughing until I suddenly stopped. My expression shifted, and I stared astonished at my nimble hands. What had happened...when did I become a thief? The movements were so clean and easy, smooth and dextrous. How strange. A soft cough sounded from the darkness. I knitted my brows and groped forwards with my hands.

"Are you feeling unwell? There's nothing urgent about your health, right."

There was silence for quite a while.

"Aiyo!" A weird cry fell from my lips.

He hurriedly spoke, "It's dark here, be careful where you walk..."

"I hit a chair."

He seemed to be laughing lightly.

My hands fumbled their way along the table as I cried, doing my best to open my eyes wide. I still couldn't see a thing with everything so gloomy.

"Why not light a lamp?"

" ... "

Where's the flint?"

He hmm'd for a long time, as if thinking it over.

I gave up on relying on him but felt everything in the dark until my hand came in contact with a wooden cupboard in a corner. Its surface was hard and slippery, and a spark lit in my brain as I felt along the wood until I forced open a door. Reaching in, I touched a small object that should've been flint. My face lit up in joy as I grabbed the candle from my robes and ignited the tip.

Turning around, I saw the waiting Fang Hua looking at me with rapt attention. The expression in his eyes was like someone using every second of his remaining life to look at me, as if missing a glance would be missing a view. As if he couldn't get enough of me, even if he stared

for an entire lifetime...

I stood stunned until a scalding hot sensation hit my arm. I nearly knocked over the candle as I placed it on the table, head lowered to readjust my sleeves after the accidental drop of wax.

Sheesh, it was embarrassing to have him stare when it was just the two of us in a room.

The sound of coughing traveled over. When I looked up again, Fang Hua was calmly reclining on his side, his expression a little tired. Was what I saw before an apparition? Shaking my head to cover my awkward face, I took the chance to look around.

The room was simple and unadorned, but tasteful. Besides a bed, the only thing that caught my eye was a dressing table. On it were a bronze mirror and a smooth, glossy wooden comb. It was curved like a crescent moon, and most of the red lacquer had faded. Various other items and things were scattered about a small makeup box, a thin collection that seemed to indicate the owner's decline in wealth.

Why were there female items in this room?

Fang Hua's hair hung loosely about him as he covered his mouth with his sleeve to stifle the sound of coughing. I withdrew my gaze to rush to the table, pouring a cup of water before handing it over. His ashen face looked sickly with that light smile as he accepted my cup with both hands. Those ice cold fingers held my own and gave me an unexpected feeling of alarm.

I withdrew my hands, splattering quite a bit of water on his robes. His expression turned dejected.

"Why are you so cold?"

"It's of no consequence. The weather's chilly, so I feel a bit cold." He looked up at me with a smile.

I felt a little shamefaced as I changed the topic. "Are you the only one living here?"

"There was once another person who lived with me for ten years," his tone was light as a warm smile crept on his features, as if he was losing himself to memories. The hazy yellow light shrouded him in a gentle, mild glow, showing a tender expression on such a calm and collected face. My heart stirred slightly, and I sat next to him on the bed.

Quietly, I asked, "Was it the emperor?"

His reaction was like someone woken from a dream, and his face turned complicated as he looked at me. Lowering his head, Fang Hua coughed a few times before taking some deep breaths. Slowly, he spoke. "He's lived here as well, when he was younger."

"What was he like back then? Did he always make serious faces?"

He laughed a few times, raising a hand to pat my sleeves before pressing down. "He wasn't like this in the past. At that time, compared to you..." His words stopped as he turned away, pulling at the bedcovers.

Desolation filled his eyes when he spoke again. "Compared to anyone, he was much more well-behaved. Actually, the one who always kicked up a row was my foster son. Zichuan was very frightened of him and didn't dare to talk back. He used to serve him tea and pour him water like he was treating an esteemed elder." There was a soft smile on his face, as if he couldn't free himself from reminiscing about former days. That was a story only between himself and Han Zichuan.

Meanwhile, I was only a bystander from beginning to end, listening to him talk.

"With three people living here, it must have been lively," I looked around with a grin. "What did the emperor like to eat when he was little? Which room did he sleep in?"

The hand on my sleeve tightened. His fingers were long and skinny enough to highlight the bones, so it hurt when he gripped me. Aiya, I wanted to draw back but I couldn't move. Instead, I gave him a surprised look as he slowly smiled back, though it made him look particularly miserable when he gazed at me.

He said, "Let's not talk about him, all right...?" It sounded like he was begging me, a bit. At that instant, my heart felt like something had suddenly rammed into it.

"I...I'm....sorry..." I was a bit depressed.

You and him are already separated, I shouldn't keep bringing up your past with him and making you speak of sad things.

Yet he only wore a gentle smile as he patted me, expression relaxed. The look in his eyes was warm enough to melt an entire river of ice. This was a well-bred, warm and cultured man. Why couldn't such a perfect person find his own true love...

"That's right..." After staring blankly for a while, I hastily helped to tuck him under the covers. "You're sick, so why isn't there any sign of your foster son?"

"He won't come."

"Why?"

"Early on, he went to make a living wandering the jianghu and made companions out of his Seven Princes. Why would he come back to this old place?" So speaking, he gave me a deep look.

"That's an outrage! How can a person act that way. A father for a day means a father for a lifetime!"

"He has his own affairs. How could I have control over him?"

"Don't let that fellow off so easily. If I were you, I'd tie him up and bring him back to kneel before the memorial tablet of his ancestors. Then I'd starve him for eight or ten days without food."

He laughed out loud, gazing at me warmly. "Then I'll do as you say in the future."

I was still lost in my own thoughts...

No wonder. I'd been here for a while, but there was nobody in these rooms except for him. An entire day would pass with nothing but the parrot crying out by itself. So it turned out that he had such an unfilial son. But...why did his smile turn me cold and flustered?

I must be getting the wrong impressions...

Suddenly, the wind blew open the windows. I got up to close them, but the gale filled the room, chilling my body and making me shiver. I couldn't take it and sneezed multiple times.

What an evil wind...

So frigid, almost enough to make me cry.

Fang Hua's gaze was fixed on me as he rose up, about to get out of bed. Just as he lifted a corner of the corners, I sat down and pressed against the bedding. "Hey, what do you want to do?"

He focused on looking at me, eyes filled with enough warmth to drown a person as he lay back down, smiling affably. I grew a little apprehensive as I gave him a doubtful look. But he continued to wave a friendly hand my way. "Come here..."

There was a trick. For him to be so agreeable without reason, there was

definitely something afoot. My neck shrank back as I recoiled, preparing to slip away. Yet he rose up to grab me from behind. I panicked as my heart started beating wildly. Laughing aloud, his hands moved from my waist to my fingers, lifting up my hands. With his body pressed against mine, he gesticulated a few times, head tilted to the side as he gave me a friendly look. "You've been negligent while attending to me. The weather's so cold and yet you're wearing so little. There should be clothes for you in this room."

And then?

I felt a little muddle-headed as he maintained his advantageous position, feeling a bit left in the dark. He was very quiet as he watched my expressions, not revealing anything as he carefully touched my hands, before meekly resting his own on my shoulders. "Look at you, your body's turned so cold.

His hands were clearly colder than mine. I lifted my eyes to glance at him. Did he always lie with such a straight face?

And also...

I really couldn't keep myself from asking as I turned towards him. "How long are you planning to hold me?"

"I..." he seemed to release me reluctantly. "I measured you a bit, it should just fit. The length of the robes should be just right, you wait..." And he lifted the covers.

But I pressed them back in place.

Fang Hua was so close to me. With his long eyelashes, he looked towards my hands in surprise before smiling. He didn't struggle, reject, or try to throw me off, but adopted a conniving expression on his face. Did this guy's illness fry his brains? If he had clothes, he should've mentioned them earlier. Did he really have to stick so close and take my measurements. I could just try on the clothes to see if they fit.

Seeing him trying to move again, I held him in place and spoke. "Your body's not well, so keep still for me."

His complexion wasn't good as his chest rose and fell. Unable to hold it in, he turned to cover his face with his sleeves and coughed again, speaking intermittently. "I want to get some clothes for you to keep out the chill. The nights are cold...and the mornings are chilly, why not...let me prepare some thicker cotton quilts for you."

"Are you done yet? Lie down..." I glared at him, but my voice softened. "Where did you put the robes? Don't get off the bed, I'll get them myself."

His eyes curved into a smile as he held me with a cold hand, the fingertips tickling my skin. "It's in the third compartment over there, just take a few sets...they're all new, so pick what you like."

I suppressed a noise.

After opening the cabinet, I finally understood what he meant by 'pick what you like'.

Two or three partitions in the entire cabinet were filled with clothing. There were plain white robes, blue-green robes, simple and elegant robes or gaudy, flowery ones...every one was folded up neatly. The third level was a bit older than the rest, and the size was a bit off. Mixed up with the bunch was even a set of woman's clothes...

Why would there be women's clothing here?!

Shocked, I touched the robes.

"I wanted to find you some clothes in the morning, but ended up lying here for half the day because of weariness." He looked at me with a remorseful face.

My hand drew back as I looked for other robes, replying carelessly, "It's no matter."

Only...

Why would he treat me so well? This was going beyond the boundaries of friendship. Fang Hua's voice drifted over from behind me. "Have you finished choosing?"

"No." I said in a low voice, hand exploring the second level of robes. The clothing all felt new, and the sizes were obviously much bigger than the previous level. I shook open some robes and compared them to my body...oh, too small. The colors of the robes weren't half bad, just that the pattern...

Un, these were all male robes, like those for a young man.

"The clothes at the bottom all have smaller measurements. The first compartment has clothes that were all newly made a few days ago."

"Whose clothes are these?"

They didn't look like Fang Hua's because they'd be too small on them. I measured a few of the top level robes and found them my perfect size. However, the measurements for these thick piles of clothing seemed to get larger and larger. Yet none of them had an owner, but all of them were new, how strange.

"It's my disciple's," he said in a low voice.

"This one as well?" I pinched out a robe and shook it out. It was very beautiful, and seemed to be made for a teenage girl. The fabric emanated a sweet-smelling fragrance.

He seemed to be smiling. "That's right."

Those two words dismissed me...as if he didn't want to discuss the matter any more.

"What a waste, making all these clothes with no one to wear them," I casually draped one over my shoulders, head lowered to tie the sash.

He gave a leisurely reply. "These were all prepared by me over the years for that unworthy child of mine. Although he's left me for many years, I still make a few sets for him every year out of habit. He used to always blame me for buying clothes that were too big for him. Now that they fit him, he's not by my side anymore."

I stood there dumbly, hands stiffening as I stopped moving.

"I used to imagine what he'd be like after he grew up." The pale yellow light shone on his figure, gentle and mild. He patiently endured another round of coughing on the bed as he smoothed out his brow, an exhausted expression on his face. "I'm really sorry, I'm telling you things you don't want to hear."

I sprawled across his bed and burst out laughing as I tucked him in, speaking lightly, "You're tired. Sleep early."

In the stillness of the night, the moonlight shone down softly.

Fang Hua sat on the bed, the moon illuminating his figure in an extremely touching manner. It was a long while before he turned over and said one more thing. "...I wanted him to stay longer by my side, but why didn't he understand?"

A long, long time afterwards, I would always remember this line.

He told me, "Actually, it's not that I didn't want to spend the family silver. And when I made the robes bigger than usual, it wasn't because I wanted him to wear it in until they were old. In fact...I just wanted him to

stay awhile longer by my side because I didn't have much time."

He slowly smiled at me, a simple but elegant smile.

When his eyebrows suddenly knitted together, they were like the misty depths of a rain shower in a landscape painting, filled with anxious worry that embellished the red teardrop mole by his eye.

Chapter 50

I had a dream.

In the dream, there was a person who kept calling me Shao'er in a voice choked with sobs, his voice both captivating and heartbroken.

When I abruptly opened my eyes, my blurry vision cleared to see the same familiar roof beams and its scattering of dust. With effort, I propped myself up and looked around. I realized I didn't know when someone had returned me to my own room.

The sunlight outside was pleasantly warm, and the table by the window had two or three robes on top, neatly folded and clean...a few threads of light scattered across its surface, making the moon-white material seem like it was wearing a plate of gold.

I was clearly at Fang Hua's place last night, so when was I carried back here?

Rubbing my eyes, I realized my mind felt woozy and my head hurt. There was the taste of medicine in my throat. I grabbed my neck with my hands, smacking my lips as I tasted something astringent and raw...and nearly threw up when I bent over.

What was the matter? I didn't remember drinking water or anything else last night in Fang Hua's room.

I tried to move the covers and get off the bed, but didn't expect a wave of darkness to swim before my eyes. My head felt faint and I saw stars, while my feet were completely listless. I managed to drape my clothes over my shoulders with difficulty, closing my eyes with knitted brows as I held onto the edge of the bed. Just when I decided to try taking a step, a warm sensation spread from my depths of my brain to fill my entire head, stopping me in place. My whole body felt off but I couldn't describe the sensation beyond my sore, burningly numb hands. As I started to recover bit by bit, my hands tightened around the bed.

A mass of white smoke billowed out. The places where I'd touched with my hands were extremely hot. Looking down, I could see the marks of my fingers against the bed, the five digits making a deep depression in the wood. It didn't seem like it could be hand-carved, because no human could have such high-level sculpting skills. The marks left by the impression were even smooth to the touch.

I was suitably shocked as I raised my hand for a look, then glanced back at the impression in the wood. They were exactly the same mold, how strange... Suspicious, I blew a puff of air into the center of my palm before pressing it against the edge of the bed again. This time, I used all of my strength.

The anticipated earth-shaking bang never came, but a depressed cry came from my mouth. I grabbed my hand and stomped my foot...

It hurt! A large portion of my hand had turned red and numb, but there was no reaction from the wood...

I looked at the imprints of my five fingers on the bed, then my injured hand, feeling in low spirits. Did I imagine it all...? As if I'd cultivate some miraculous abilities overnight!

Pah, how annoying.

I draped my clothes over my shoulders like a ruffian before putting on my shoes and flinging open the door. After excitedly stepping out, I realized that I had absolutely nothing to do. This godforsaken place had no signs of people or birds around. Dejected, I sat beneath the eaves with my hands on my knees. The courtyard was filled with the fragrance of bamboo, the jade-green leaves rustling in the breeze, yet filled with a tranquil elegance...

This was a nice place, and the air was fresh. But it'd been awhile since I had been snatched out of the palace, so the emperor should be worried. Moreover, since I'd disappeared for so long, the court must be in an uproar. Who knew if Little Li would be punished for losing me?

Fang Hua once said it was rare to see humans here. You might spot a single person in the span of a few months, here to sell necessities and take people down the mountain. If I wanted to leave, I'd have to go with one of them to descend the peak. Such a desolate, deserted place, yet he stayed so enjoyably within it.

I pinched off a piece of grass to put in my mouth, hands slipping into my sleeves as I stood up and looked around hopefully. I dove into the bamboo groves and brushed aside the plants as I meandered slowly

along...

Rays of sunlight streamed down from the tops. I raised my head and walked around in a circle. Besides bamboo, there was nothing but more bamboo around here and the occasional sound of rustling leaves...wait, rustling?

My scalp turned numb. I don't know if my own imagination was to blame, but it felt like my feet had grown heavier. Stunned in place, I glanced downwards and saw a light green snake pressing on my foot, slowly sliding its slippery length across me...

I stood dumbfounded as a chill crept up my back. My feet were stock still, but my body couldn't help shaking and my legs felt like jelly. The damp yellow mud beneath my shoes felt very slippery, and I lost my balance to stagger backwards before flipping over and rolling down a hill...

Curses, where did this slope show up from?

I only saw my vision blur as I rolled like a burst of autumn wind scattering the fallen leaves. I don't know how many circles I did, only that I was very dizzy. A hot qi rose from my chest to warm my entire body before I violently ran into something. But I didn't feel any pain. The little pebbles on the slope, along with the fallen leaves, threw themselves against my face as I kept tumbling downwards. I turned aside and spat, covering half my face with my sleeves. Something cold and smooth by my back had stopped my progress. Using my courage, I groped backwards with my hand before looking to see a section of bamboo growing from the side of the hill...

Good thing it'd grown here, or things would've turned black if I kept tumbling down. The Heavens really were merciful, I knew I wasn't destined to die in the prime of my life...

Wiping away my sweat, I used the bamboo to help my shaking self to my feet. My robes were filthy, and some parts had been torn open by the fall. You could faintly see traces of my inner robe from the outside. I massaged my waist, catching my breath while I held onto the bamboo for support. The hot qi that had been concentrated in my chest before slowly receded away...

Speaking of which, this was weird. I'd fallen down from so high, but not only were my bones fine, I also felt no pain on my body. Taking a breath, I experimentally moved my arms and legs. Right now, everything felt extremely comfortable.

...too bad about my clothes, though.

I lifted up my robes, looking around in bewilderment. There was no time to consider the details because something caught my attention as soon as I lifted my eyes. A disorderly copse of trees stood before me. Within the luxuriant branches and foliage, there were still places with withered leaves. The whole thing looked as if they were planted by hand. Whoever did it must have been in a rush, and didn't take care to maintain the plants. Curious, I reached out with my hands and made an opening in the trees until I saw a small path. It seemed to lead to the foot of the hill...

Weird, didn't Fang Hua said there wasn't a way down the mountain? Unless he was lying? Whatever the case, I smelled the hint of a

conspiracy...

Recalling Fang Hua's former words, I couldn't help but feel my heart sink. Things felt off. There were only the two of us living at his house. All the empty spaces in front of the residence had been overtaken by medicinal plants. He didn't seem to be growing any vegetables or raising livestock behind the house. I'd been here for half a month and wasted quite a bit of food since then. These days, if it wasn't grains, then it was meat and fish being offered to me everyday. If the facts were really as they said—that someone would only come by the mountain every few months—then wouldn't I have starved to death by half a month?

I never expected that such an Immortal-like person could lie so easily, without even blinking. What was his purpose in keeping me here...? The more I thought, the more I felt things were off. I suddenly turned around and hastily climbed up the slope. I walked until I entered my room and closed the door.

It wasn't advisable to linger...

Taking a deep breath, I sprawled beneath the bed to fish out a piece of gunny cloth. Cementing my heart, I turned my face away to pinch a corner of the smelly cloth, shaking it out before spreading it open. Turning around, I found a few robes from the wardrobe and dug out two mantou halves hidden in a pillow that I muffled in a cloth.

These days, you could never forget to pack food...if there was more time, I wanted to get some meat from the steamer in the kitchen to

sandwich between my mantou, because it'd be delicious to eat on the road. I'd starved so much when the kidnapper had taken me here. That crafty scoundrel was only concerned about eating his own mantou instead of whether or not I'd starve to death. Being knocked out didn't mean I couldn't eat...

So thinking, my pleased face quickly turned sober. Exactly who had taken me from the imperial court? Why would they risk themselves doing such a thing? If they wanted to harm me, they didn't have to go to so much trouble and expense. So many people died yearly in the palace, so why not stab me a few times while I was unconscious and throw my body in a well?

Originally, I thought my adversary wanted to use Fang Hua to get rid of me, but Fang Hua hadn't created any difficulties for me despite my old affair with the emperor. Instead, he treated me very well. His morals were top-notch and his temper was excellent. There was no sign that he planned to hurt me. Not only did he leave me alone, but these days I was even the one bullying him. When I realized he had no intentions to harm me, I gave up the idea of slipping away so quickly. Besides, he told me there was no way off the mountain. Rather than rashly set off by myself, it'd be better to quietly wait for the emperor to rescue me. But now things didn't seem so simple.

From the path I discovered today, I could tell...that Fang Hua was lying. Some villain in the court had thought of a way to bring me to Fang Hua's doorstep. Now he was using a thousand different ways to trick me and keep me from going to the palace. Could it be that Fang Hua was in cahoots with that villain? But...that didn't seem likely, he just didn't look like that kind of person.

Aiya, so tiresome. I scratched my head, brows furrowed in serious

thought. The most important thing now was...

To get out.

I tied a knot in my cloth bundle and placed it under my arm before pushing open the door. My thoughts were in disorder, making it impossible for me to conjecture anything.

...it'd be better to get the facts once I returned to the palace.

I entered the forest anew like a hapless housefly jostling her way blindly through until I grew confused...how was I supposed to take this path...? I'd been in such a rush, I forgot to leave marks on the road for myself.

Was it this way...?

Or was it that way...?

"Aish, I'll just walk as I please," I moved my bag to my shoulders, face a mix of high aspirations and unflinching determination in the face of death. "The cart will find its way round the hill when it gets there[1]."

I brushed aside the irritating tree branches and looked upon the widened expanse before me...unfortunately, the added view also came with one extra person...

A cluster of white pear blossoms bloomed splendidly before me. Beyond the pear tree was a wooden table where a person stood with brush in hand, bending over a painting. His dark robes made his face especially jade-like, and those fair, white hands were arranged in a beautiful posture. He raised his head to look at me with gentle eyes.

It was Fang Hua...

Seized with shock, I could only stand unmoving as he looked at me. W-was his illness better? He was coughing all last night, but now he was dressed so thinly outdoors. How could he have the spare time to paint?

I was surprised. But I stuck fast in place, unwilling and unable to move. While I frowned, his line of sight slowly moved on to rest on the bag by my shoulders, seemingly lost in thought. His staring made my scalp turn numb as I dejectedly lowered my head. Seeing that there was no way out, I hoisted my bag up and prepared to turn back.

"Why do you always want to leave me?" A cool but tender voice accosted me from behind. It made my heart tremble to hear it and my feet turned into lead, unable to take another step. I turned around to face him, seeing his still form looking at me from a distance. His robes fluttered in the breeze, plain and unadorned as ever. Pear blossom petals drifted in the air to rest on his shoulders, and his face was filled with a grief that made my heart ache.

"Where do you want to go?" he kept asking, though in a much softer voice.

I gave a derisive smile, shaking my head in embarrassment. "I've

troubled you for so long, so..."

"Don't try to stall me with words again," he cut me off, a firm tone in his voice. "These past years, you've all left me one by one..."

He was fixated on me, smiling despite the anguish in his brows. "You should know, I don't have much time left with you all."

Something tightened in my heart. He knew this much about himself...a man like this, why didn't anyone want him? It must be lonely to stay at this big house by himself. My voice grew hoarse, but before I could reply, he spoke to me in an injured tone.

"You can actually bearing ruining the clothes I gave to you. Look at this, it's all in tatters."

Hey, you try falling down the side of a mountain.

"You want to leave me, even if it means climbing your way through the mess of branches?"

So it turned out that mass of tree branches was really planted there on purpose. Speechless, I gave him a resentful glare. It looked like he wanted to say some more, but his mouth didn't move. With a pale face, his expression stilled to one of desolation. It made my soften to see him. Originally, I wanted to ask him why he blocked the path with those trees or something about his evil intentions.

Instead, what came out was, "Have you taken your medicine yet?"

He nodded.

After his usual silence, he spoke again. "I'm going to die anyways. It doesn't matter whether it happens sooner or later. What's the point of taking medicine when you're just one person here?"

His words made my heart tremble. This person, he could play the qin and drink and paint and live merrily, so why did he keep cursing himself to die? Though, his expression really did look lonely. He sadly shook his head when I offered to support him, and sat down on the ground in low spirits. Those smooth black strands of hair rested across his shoulders, dark against his white upper robes. He used a sleeve to cover his mouth, chest heaving in a fit of violent coughing.

"Forget it." I was thoroughly defeated by him. After hesitating for quite a while, my conscience gave in and I unloaded my bag. "I'll wait until you get better. Don't keep saying that you'll die so soon."

"So you're not leaving?"

Leaving...how could I not want to leave?

I glanced at him again, sitting quietly on the ground with a melancholy expression that made my heart quiver...the words rose to my lips and did a circle.

"Leaving. I'll leave after you're well."

His eyes curved into a smile. I foolishly smiled along before I came to my senses. Did I just agree to...stay...here?

Shock.

Look at my good-for-nothing senses. Vexed, I shook my head. But seeing him smile so happily, I couldn't help but feel the corners of my own mouth rise up. The issue of leaving of house thus ended here.

It was only later on that I realized...he was smiling so happily because he knew he wouldn't get better, but I'd agreed to spend the rest of his life with him, even if it wasn't much. Thus, I began my promised undertaking, serving him tea and pouring him water like an old mother or a servant. As to the emperor, I always wanted to pass him a message using a messenger of some kind. But every time I lifted my brush, I wouldn't know what to write...somehow, I didn't want him to know I was here with Fang Hua. I tossed and turned the idea in my mind for half a day before deciding to tell him myself afterwards. I'd take care of Fang Hua first. In such a way, I resolved the problem laying on my heart.

[1] the cart will find its way round the hill when it gets there (车到山前必有路) —che dao shanqian bi you lu, saying meaning that "things will eventually sort themselves out."

